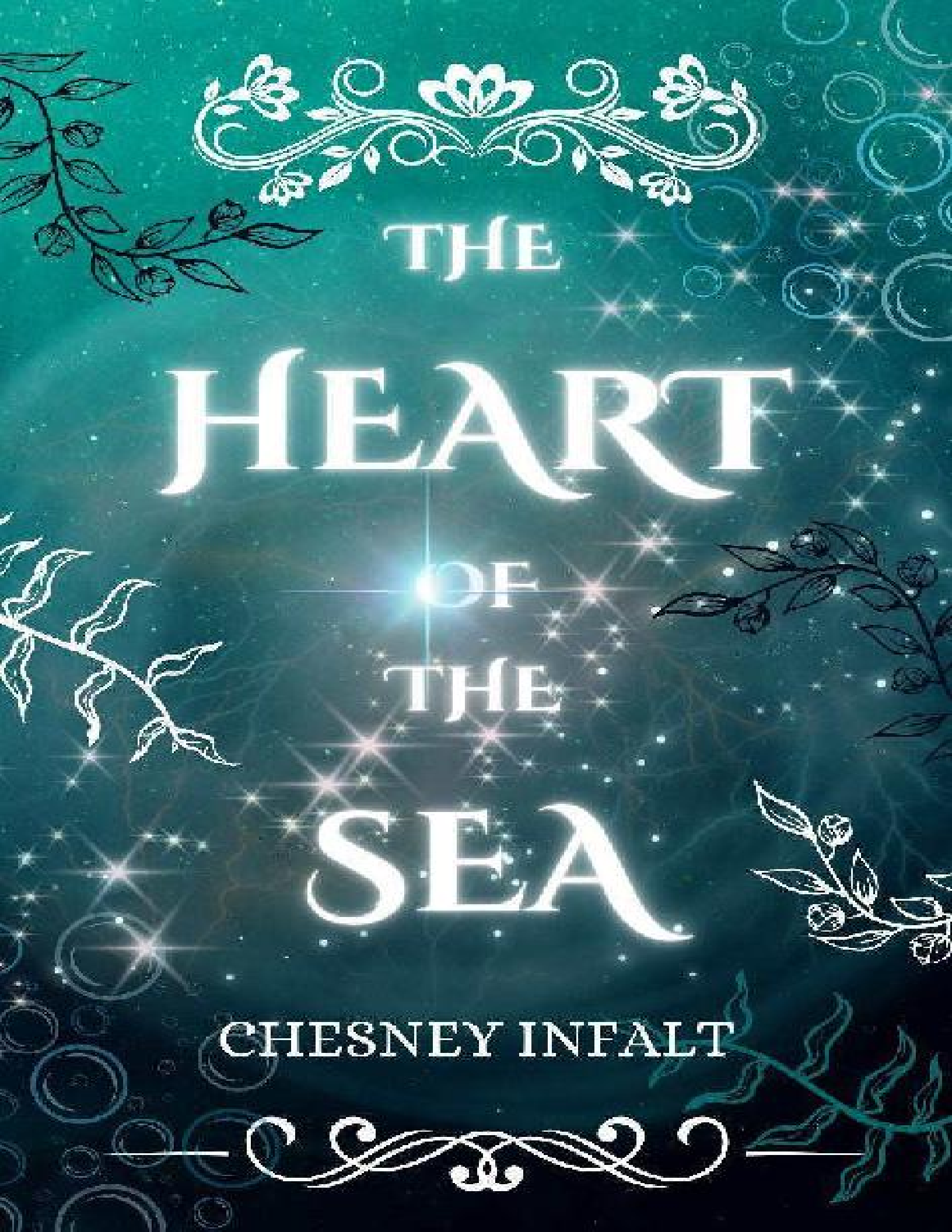
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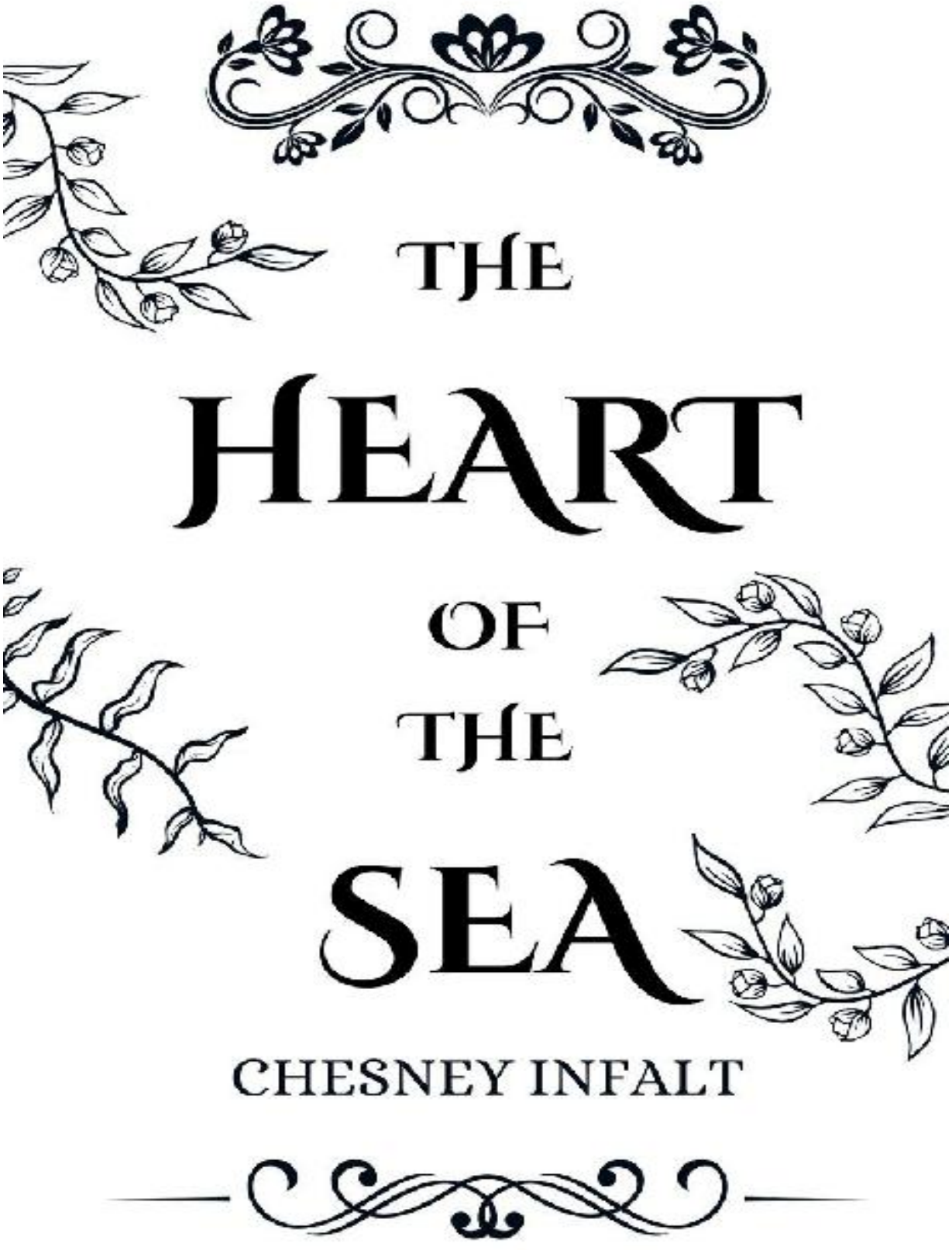
THE
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The Heart Of The Sea
A Gender-Swapped Fairytale Retelling

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~Warrior's Heart

Standalone Books

~Worth Fighting For

~Puppy Love

CONTENTS

Five Years Prior
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Five Years Prior
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Five Years Prior
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Five Years Prior
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Five Years Prior
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Five Years Prior
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Five Years Prior
Chapter Fourteen
Five Years Prior
Chapter Fifteen
Five Years Prior
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Five Years Prior
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Five Years Prior
Chapter Twenty
Five Years Prior
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three

Five Years Prior
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One

Acknowledgments

To those who love—and still believe in—fairytales.

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

SABINE

The pouring rain dragged at the heavy silks of my gown, trying to slow me down… But I wouldn't. I wanted to see him.

My safe haven was in those caves, the booming thunder overhead keeping pace with my pounding feet. I ran as best as I could across the grass and dirt, my heels seeking to plunge into the earth and twist my ankle. Whatever I'd done to make them hate me was beyond me.

I reached the edge of the beach, yanking off my shoes and stockings before gathering my skirts and resuming my sprint. There was no chance of making it across the sand in them, and if I was confined to the palace because of an injured ankle, I would go mad before a week passed, of that I was sure.

The sea rushed forward quickly, lapping at my feet as I hurried toward the nearby cave. Rain began to pelt me, dropping in thick sheets that made it hard to see. I shivered but kept pace.

Just before reaching the entrance of the cave, I had a horrible thought: what if the storm kept him from visiting today? It was far too dangerous to use Mormor's magic underwater instrument to call him—not even I was that reckless, especially not in this attire.

Thunder roared; lightning flashed.

I avoided the churning seawater that flooded into the cave pool, instead sticking to the small bit of stone floor that was already slick from the raging waters that spilled onto it and then receded just as quickly.

The tightness in my chest eased the moment I caught sight of the merman, leaning over the stone flooring, trying to use a quill with his webbed fingers to write on a piece of parchment. The gills on the sides of his neck flared slightly, letting me know he was irritated.

“Caspian.” I couldn’t help grinning.

He looked at me, his bright blue eyes taking in my sorry state of dress. I no doubt looked wild, cosmetics running, hair loose and slung in strands about my face and neck, gown soaked and torn in a few places where thorny bushes managed to snag me while I fled.

“Parchment and ink are useless when wet,” I told him. “Did Mormor give that to you?”

Caspian sighed, his claws pressing into the quill. “Your grandmother thought it would be helpful for me to better understand your language.”

I took the items from him and placed them on a makeshift shelf we put together months ago for times like these, setting them alongside beautiful shells Caspian had given me over the years. I tossed my shoes and stockings up there for good measure. The trousers and shirt I “borrowed” from my brother Oliver were there as well, but I didn’t want them drenched.

He was smirking at me when I turned back around. “Are we not going to discuss why you are out here in the middle of a storm?” From his tone, I could hear the unspoken addition *dressed like that?*

“I have every intention of telling you.” I knelt on the edge and used the seawater to wash away what was left of the cosmetics. *Good riddance.*

Caspian watched me, his tail flicking every so often to remind me that he was not waiting *patiently*. “Well?” he finally said. “Whatever happened must have been terrible for you to choose being cold and soaked out here over being safe and dry in the palace.”

“You know I always prefer being out here with you than there,” I said before I could think of what my words implied. My cheeks heated; his smirk turned into a small smile.

“What happened?” He moved a little closer to me, making me blush more. Merfolk always looked to be in a state of undress, and I supposed clothing would be terribly inconvenient underwater, but it was something I had yet to get used to. His tail started just where his hips would be if he

were human, and other than the iridescent scales there and in random patches on the upper half of his body, the rest was exposed flesh that looked just like ours, if not paler and colder.

He surveyed me again; his eyes might have been disconcerting for someone else, being bigger than a human's, but that part I had gotten used to.

"I had another duel."

Something dark flashed across his expression and was quickly replaced with an amusement that didn't quite pass as believable. "It must be terrible, having so many men after your heart."

"They are not after my heart," I argued, pulling out the pins holding my hair into place. The storm still thundered on, and the rain echoed in the cave. "I found out they have a bet to see which one of them can be my first kiss." Caspian remained quiet, his face unreadable as I continued. "I am nothing but a prize to them, a game. So I challenged Prince Lucas to a sword duel and bested him, but my mother demanded I apologize to him and his family immediately." I huffed and twisted my hair to get at least some of the water out. "His sword training is abysmally lacking if I could disarm him so quickly. And he *deserves* the black eye for trying to force me to kiss him. You would think my mother would have been more concerned with protecting her precious daughter's reputation than preserving a prince's pride." I huffed again for good measure. The frustration remained.

No more thunder and lightning, just the heavy fall of rain hitting water and stone. I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, hoping the sound of rainfall would help calm me.

"You could beat them at their own game," Caspian suggested.

My eyes snapped open. "What do you mean? How?"

He tilted his head slightly, some of his long black hair slipping over one shoulder. "If the game is to be your first kiss, is there someone you would want to kiss you? Then their game would be ruined."

I bit my lower lip and tried to look like I was contemplating my options, when all that was really running through my mind was how he would react if I gave him an honest answer.

“Sabine?”

I cleared my throat. Not the most princess-like thing I’d done, but I was far past that anyway. “I, um… Well, no one at court comes to mind.”

He raised a brow. “Is there someone *not* at court?”

“…Yes.”

Water flowed and ebbed at a slower pace now, the rainfall not as loud. At least, not in comparison to my beating heart. Caspian inched closer, enough for me to see the small details in his individual scales. He put a hand to my forehead.

“Your cheeks are flushed. Are you feeling ill?”

A strangled laugh escaped me. “No, I… *Ahem.* No, I am not ill.” I forced myself to meet his steady gaze. His irises were blue, with the very centers an emerald green, reminding me of the sea. Similar to the colors in his tail.

“Would you like to kiss me?” I blurted before I could lose the nerve.

His eyes widened; his tail stilled.

I had no idea what that meant.

Thinking he might be offended, I started to put together an apology, but Caspian gently cupped my cheek, his hand cold and wet, which felt wonderful on my burning skin.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

All I could do was nod.

His throat bobbed. Caspian leaned in slowly, giving me ample time to change my mind. As if I would. He paused just before, his breath cool on my lips.

“I’m sure,” I whispered.

Caspian kissed me softly. He tasted of the sea, and each little touch to my jaw and neck set off fireworks in my stomach.

“Sabine!”

We pulled apart abruptly, and I scrambled to my feet, nearly tripping on the hem of my dress.

“That’s Oliver,” I said, even though he was sure to recognize my brother’s voice like I had. Caspian stared at me, his pupils bigger than normal. “That kiss was—”

I was about to say “wonderful,” but my brother and grandmother rounded the corner then, reaching the entrance to the cave. The rain was little more than a drizzle now, but they brought umbrellas. “—satisfactory. However, you should remember that parchment and ink are utterly useless when wet.” I turned toward them as if just realizing they were here. “Mormor, Oliver, good to see you.”

“Good to see us?” Oliver offered a wry smile. “You flee in the middle of a storm, and when we find you, all you have to say is ‘Good to see you’? You must have *some* notion of how irate Mor is at your disappearance.”

Mormor spoke up, saying, “We thought it best we find you before she does. Your mother is a woman of many good qualities, but her temper is not one of them.” The crow’s feet around her eyes became more obvious as she smiled at Caspian. “Good to see you, Prince of the Kingdom Below. Are you making sure our Sabine is staying out of trouble?”

“That is nigh on impossible, Marina,” Caspian answered, garnering a chuckle from my grandmother.

“Truer words have never been spoken.” She looked back and forth between the two of us, making me want to hide. A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“We’d better return you to the palace before Mor can reach her full wrath,” Oliver said, extending a hand to me. Then he frowned. “Wherever are your shoes? Your stockings?”

Instinctively, I curled my toes under, as if that would conceal them. “Right here.” I snatched them from the shelf, intent on carrying them back.

“If you don’t put them on now,” Oliver warned, “you’ll have sand in your stockings. One of the worst feelings.” He shuddered dramatically to make me laugh, and it worked. As I started to put them on, he frowned. “Are those my clothes?”

“You try wearing dresses and corsets and petticoats! It feels as though women’s clothing is made for the sole purpose of strangling the life out of us.”

He rolled his eyes. “Just put on your stockings and shoes so we can return. Mor is furious she had to cut tea with Duchess Amelia short.”

“Then perhaps I should commandeer a ship with Captain Bill and come back in three weeks when she’s calmed down.”

“You’d need longer than that, dear sister.”

Mormor raised a brow in Caspian’s direction. “So, Prince, you were practicing your writing? Is that all?”

“I was practicing my writing.” Caspian kept eye contact, which was impressive, considering how quickly the look Mormor was giving him made Oliver and me squirm. Sanne too, but our little sister was not in trouble nearly as often as the two of us were. “Although Sabine does make a good point: things of the Kingdom Above rarely fare well when water is involved.”

“Mmmmhmmmm,” Mormor said in response, making her disbelief apparent. “Very well then. Come now, children. Caspian, we shall see you again soon, I am sure.” She turned, her robe barely scraping the ground. Where I had layers upon unnecessary layers, Mormor was allowed—even expected—to wear her lightweight, pale robe. The merfolk symbols stitched along the neckline, hem, and edges of the sleeves denoted her as the Ambassador of the Sea instead of being a priestess.

One day, I hoped I would get the chance to wear them, if not take on her mantle. But that required her passing away, and I did not wish that to happen for as long as possible. So I was stuck with whatever my mother had the servants secure me into.

We said our farewells to Caspian, and I tried to hide my smile as I kept pace with Oliver and Mormor. Oliver dutifully held his umbrella over the both of us despite how soaked I already was.

Once we reached the palace, Mormor ordered Oliver to fetch our parents.

“But the servants could do so.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I asked you to.”

He put on a sheepish smile. “Very well, Mormor. Right away.” With an apologetic kiss to her cheek, he handed his umbrella to an awaiting servant and left us.

“Mor is going to unleash her full wrath on me, isn’t she?” I asked Mormor, but by the look on her face, that was probably the least of my worries.

Grinning in a way to make me embarrassed without knowing exactly why, Mormor suggested quietly, “To avoid more trouble, I suggest keeping your kisses with Prince Caspian to yourself.”

CHAPTER ONE

SABINE

It will work this time, I tell myself as I scramble down the sandy hills to the beach shore. *It has to.* I clutch a metal disc in one hand, somehow managing to keep a grip on them even as the sand shifts under my feet and I slide partway down.

The water is calm, the sun high in the sky, making the water shimmer vibrant greens and blues. Any other time, I would have brought my paints to try to capture the serenity of the scene, but not today.

No one is around, so I go to the cave entrance to quickly change out of my dress and into my brother's trousers and baggy shirt. I tie the backs of both so they're not as loose, securing them with ribbons my handmaiden Alma uses for my hair. I'd prefer clothes tailored for me, but the ones I did have were shredded in the Condemned attack… and Father and Mother insist that I not wear men's clothing. Unsuitable for a princess. If I only do what is suitable for a princess, I might die of boredom.

I leave my dress and shoes in a neat pile on the shelf before I pick up the metal disc and step into the water. The disc is smooth and as wide as a book, so it's easily held with one arm while I use the other to help me dive under. Sticking your head under is always the most intense in my opinion, waking up all your nerves with the cold. Feet are much easier. But the further you walk out, the more anticipation builds, so I try to go as quickly as possible, diving under as soon as I have just enough room to swim.

The world around me goes silent, making me realize just how many little sounds the surface has to offer. I enjoy the silence and the way the water lazily plays with my braid and clothes as if to welcome me back into this wonderful world.

The disc is heavier underwater, so I regrip it and swim, thankful to my grandmother for teaching me when I was young. I know the way by heart, could go with my eyes closed. I won't though: the first rule of the sea is to respect it and everything living within it. Keep your eyes open and be ready to avoid territorial creatures. Especially merfolk.

But there is one of the merfolk I would trust with my life.

Deeper I go. Little fish skitter by in schools of bright colors. I smile and keep on task, arriving at a cliff just before the drop-off. A series of connected poles with various size discs await me, just as shiny as the one in my hands.

"Things of magic do not rust," my grandmother used to tell me. "The only thing that can taint magic is a greedy soul." I'm still not sure what that means, but Mormor's words always felt like they carried significance, so I hold them close.

My lungs begin to ache as I fit the disc to the final pole. It takes a moment to get it on just right. Then suddenly it feels like Mormor is there watching, waiting to see if I remember.

I pick up the metal rods resting at the base of the instrument, thin yet weighty. I let the melody play in my mind as I recall Mormor playing it, her movements fluid and strong. But that is a memory from five years ago, and the pattern is lost to me, a jumble of blurred motions. The first tap is experimental—tap, I suppose, isn't the right word. It takes more force than I expected to hit the disc hard enough to emit more than a soft sound. And the sound needs to carry far.

I drop the rods and kick to the surface. Once my burning lungs are partially sated, I dive back under. This time I don't think, I just latch onto the feeling of Mormor, of the sea, of the merfolk… of Caspian… and I play. At first, the sounds echo as just noise, like foreign words with no one to translate them, awkward and halted and strange. I start again, and again, chasing the melody in my head.

Movement beside me grabs my attention; I brace myself, not sure if it worked or if I attracted something else entirely.

It is just my brother Oliver, floating beside me shirtless and shoeless. Of course he knew to find me here. Mormor taught all of us grandchildren how to call the merfolk, although Oliver is busy with things like being married to care about our duties to the merfolk, and Sanne was too young at the time to remember much.

But I care, and I remember. So much more than I probably should.

He points toward the surface; I shake my head. Once more, I try to coax the song from the instrument.

Help me, Mormor.

This time, the notes ripple through the water, making their own current toward the Kingdom Below. Invisible pathways, but I can feel them. The song alights my soul, promising me that it worked, that the message will be carried. I will see him again.

They could send someone else. But I hope they don't. And I hope that the merfolk are still out there, that they have not been taken over by the Condemned. Hope is what I have left, my last resort. If I can have this one thing, I will learn to be content, will learn to live the life my parents chose for me, the life Oliver has grown to love. It is an empty promise I tell myself to justify sneaking away from the palace.

I set the rods down at the base of the instrument. My chest burns to draw in breath, but still I wait, my eyes on the distant darkness. The notes are subtle vibrations now, barely there.

I'm here. Come find me. Not all have forgotten.

My lungs seize. Oliver grabs my arm and propels us upward, his grip unyielding despite how much I yank and twist. He drags me onto dry sand, and I cough up the bit of water I'd unintentionally inhaled. I'm still coughing when I push onto my feet and try to get back into the sea.

But Oliver has me before my toe can even touch the edge.

“Let go! I had it this time! They’re coming!”

“You almost drowned, Sabine.” Oliver turns me around and grips my shoulders so he can look me in the face. “We can wait for them here.” He sits and pats the cave floor beside him.

With that, the fight goes out of me, and I sink down next to my brother. Silently, we wait, our gazes locked on the water. Reprimands are not Oliver’s way. He doesn’t tell me how silly he thinks I’m being or remind me that I promised our parents I would focus on choosing a suitor. Instead, he sits with me as the sun sinks lower in the sky.

All the while, I run my thumb over the bracelet that never leaves my wrist, no matter how much it bothers my mother. An old, fraying thing, its colors are fading despite how vivid the memories attached to it are and the strength of the magic that still thrums through it. Caspian called it a dream bracelet when he gave it to me all those years ago.

Caspian…

Hundreds of years of humans and merfolk living in harmony, and all that we have left of them now are my dream bracelet and the underwater instrument I reconstructed.

And the scars that twist the flesh of my throat and right leg. At least, our mother would count that since the Condemned started out as merfolk.

I do not.

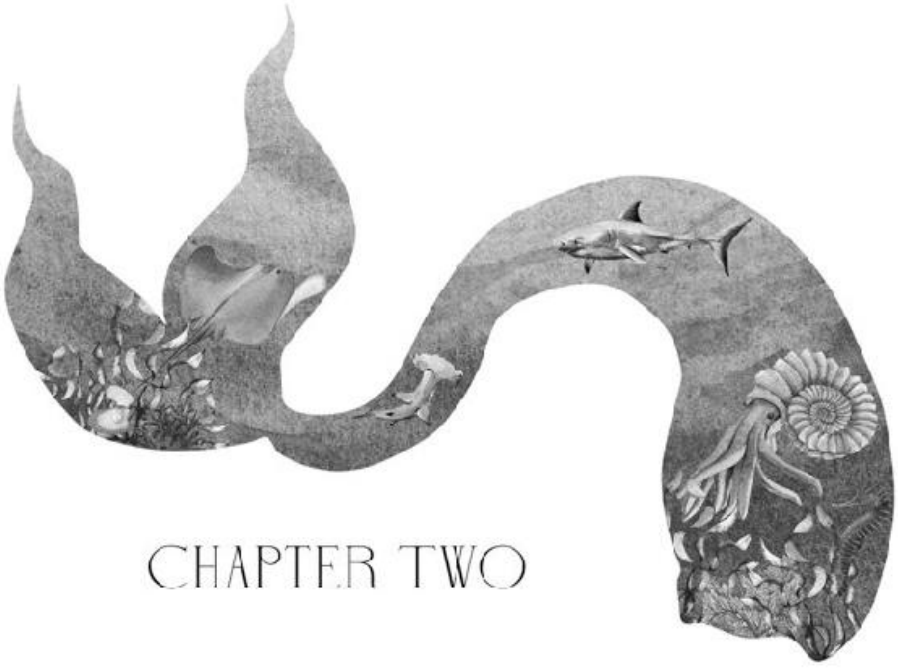
Oliver stands and pulls on his shirt and shoes. “I have a surprise for you, if you’re interested,” he offers. “Call it an early birthday present.”

There is a gentle kindness to Oliver’s blue eyes that is present in every expression he makes. I don’t know if it’s the shape of them or the pale hue. Perhaps both.

I stand and don’t bother to wipe the sand off. Oliver already has my things in his arms. He knows that if I don’t have to wear the dress, I won’t, so he refrains from offering. We walk out of the cave and away from the instrument after one last glance over my shoulder.

“I’m sorry they didn’t come.”

I don’t reply. At least not aloud. *I’m sorry too, Mormor. I thought they’d come.*



CHAPTER TWO

CASPIAN

The first note is like waking from a deep sleep. It fills my chest with warmth and brings a smile to my lips before I even know to be happy. By the time the third one reaches me, I turn toward the sound and see the barely visible path it dances through the water.

Sabine Sabine Sabine calls my heart. But there is a possibility it is someone else entirely.

Devere catches my arm, stopping me short. “Father will want to choose who goes to see them. It has been too long—we must be careful.”

I throw him an incredulous look. “Because it has been so long, we should act fast, else they will think we are ignoring them and they take offense.”

The gills on his neck twitch in irritation, but I can see in his face that he is considering the wisdom in what I said. I weigh my next words, knowing that if I press him too far, he will drag me back to the palace. Well, try. He would need help because I have no intention of ignoring the song that is tugging on my soul.

He must come to this realization as well. His tail flicks; I keep a neutral expression even as a knowing smile tugs at my mouth. He wants to answer the Call too.

“We checked the perimeter as Father asked,” I tell him. A senseless task to keep his two restless sons out of trouble. Guards are always posted as a reminder to the other creatures of the sea that we will not be crossed, and there are enough now to be considered a small army. “We are safe. Return if you will, but I must answer the Call.”

It takes Devere a few more seconds. He glances at the glittering palace, a shining city in the darkness of the deep, before nodding at me. “I will go

with you. It is foolhardy to answer it alone."

We hurry through the water with ease, knowing which routes avoid unwanted meetings with the more unpleasant creatures. Echoes of the notes linger like a trail. The closer we get, the faster I try to go, leaving Devere to keep pace.

The instrument comes into view, looking just as pristine as I had last seen it years ago. It hums with magic as if happily welcoming us back to the World Above. No one is there, but they could be sitting in the cave, so we slow down as we reach the surface so as not to scare whoever is waiting.

My gills flare, trying to suck in water and air, and it takes me a moment to remember how to breathe through my mouth and nose. Devere has the same issue, so I say, "Close your gills. It helps."

The air tastes strange, different than I recall.

At first, it seems like no one is here either. A few shells and trinkets I brought Sabine over the years rest on the shelf, untouched, as if preserved in time. Memories bring a swell of emotions that I press down just enough to keep calm.

The phantom notes frolic about my mind as I survey the area, certain I missed something.

"Where are we going?"

The voice, female, carries from down the beach. Devere and I exchange a quick glance before we follow them, swimming along the coast. They are certainly not a threat. I see no spears, no knives, no guns. If they dared challenge us, our magic could swallow them into the depths without a second thought.

Besides, they have to be the ones who Called us: the remnants of the magic song linger on the female's fingertips… but why are they leaving? The last Ambassador stayed as long as it took for us to answer.

The male smiles at her. There are a lot of similarities between them, including the yellow of their hair, reminding me of the sun. It has been too

long since I have been to the World Above, so I have forgotten how to judge age the way they do. Not that I had learned enough to begin with. There is always more I want to learn.

“It’s not much of a surprise if I tell you,” teases the male, but then he points to a rowboat nearby.

Devere and I draw closer quietly. The female grins even as she furrows her brow. “Far and Mor know we’re out here?”

The male sighs. “Yes. Enough with the questions, Sabine. Don’t ruin your surprise.”

Sabine. The name hits me in the chest. Could it be?

Devere eyes me, but I cannot bring myself to look away from her. It is too hard to tell who she is at this distance.

They have rowed past us by the time Devere ventures to ask, “Is that really her?”

“I…” Words stick in my throat, not just because of how dry it is up here. I meet Devere’s studious gaze. “I have to find out.”

Curiosity lighting his expression, Devere says, “I was hoping you would say that. Come, let us hurry.”

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

CASPIAN

"Caspian!"

I broke the kiss with Sabine and sighed. "Someone always interrupts."

Arms still around my neck, Sabine smirked at me and then called over my shoulder, "Hello, Dev!"

I turned just enough to shoot him a glare. Devere grinned in response and swam into the cave's pool.

"At least someone is happy to see me," he remarked.

"I would be if you had better timing."

"Where would be the fun in that?"

Sabine rolled her eyes. "Have you come to start a fight with your brother or retrieve him?"

Devere's grin widened. "I know better than to start a fight with him in front of you, Sabine. You would defend him, and then I would stand no chance."

A twinkle in her eye, Sabine lifted her chin. "I'm glad we have an understanding." She let her arms fall back to her sides, but I did not move away from her.

My brother raised a brow. "So, what were we studying today?"

"We were teaching Caspian to read." Sabine snatched the book that had been carelessly tossed behind her the moment her grandmother had left to attend a meeting.

"'We'?"

"Mormor had to leave to discuss—"

Devere cut her off, saying, "I know. Our parents are attending the meeting as well. Which is why I thought it would be the perfect time to go

on an adventure."

"Oh, where to?"

Before Sabine could get too excited, I said, "He is speaking of a cavern in the deep sea. There are tales of a sea witch who can make the desires of your heart real, and our brothers dared us to visit her."

"And we want to find her," said Devere. "Or prove our brothers wrong. Chances are they think we are too scared to explore such a haunted place. We are supposed to bring them proof that we did."

Sabine chewed her bottom lip. "How deep is the cavern?"

"Far too deep for you to swim," I told her. "Devere, we can explore another time. I doubt she is even real."

"This is our chance now! Who knows when the next meeting will be? And what if she is real? Her magic is said to be nearly limitless."

We stared each other down.

"He's right," Sabine said, breaking the silence. She pulled her feet out of the water and stood. "This is your chance. If there is a sea witch, think of what she could do for you."

I did think about it: I thought of Sabine being able to visit my world, of me visiting hers, of us no longer being separated. As if she could read my mind, Sabine smiled and pressed a quick kiss to my lips.

"I expect to hear all about it tomorrow," she said. "I will be here as soon as I finish my lessons. Or earlier if I can manage to sneak out."

I could not help but smile back at her. "So earlier tomorrow then." I stole another kiss before she stepped back and shooed me off.

"Go on! Find the sea witch and bring back an intriguing story for me."

She was still watching from the cave entrance and waving at me when Devere tugged me under the water. I yanked my arm out of his grasp.

"You could have given me another few minutes with her before interrupting."

"You still would have been cross with me," he returned.

“Just as you are cross with me when I interrupt your time with Clia.”

This time, his expression fell into seriousness. “That is because Clia is my…” He trailed off, studying me like he was seeing something obvious he had overlooked. “Caspian, is Sabine your mate? Is that even possible between merfolk and humans?”

Both questions had been plaguing my mind since our first kiss. “I… I do not know.” If she were merfolk, that would have been an easy answer for me, because she would have been feeling the same things. But I had never heard a story of merfolk mating with humans. How would it work if we did? Neither of us could live in the other’s world, at least not without the help of magic stronger than even we merfolk possessed.

Devere seemed to guess my thoughts, because he nodded decisively. “Then we know what we must ask the sea witch.”

I did not bother to tell him my doubts about her existence.

Devere took the lead, and I kept pace. Thankfully, he did not leave me to my thoughts, which were beginning to spiral downward rapidly.

“We need to be prepared,” he said quietly, amber eyes scanning the deep every so often. Creatures tended to give us space unless they needed help, and where we were headed had fewer and fewer as we went along. “If the stories about her are true, then neither of us is to make a deal with her unless we absolutely have to and we know that we will succeed. Consider all of her words and the various meanings they could take.”

“What if we miss something?”

His countenance darkened. “We will deal with things as we come to them.” Then, after a small pause: “I will give my opinion, but the final decision on whether to take the sea witch’s offer will be yours.”

What would I willingly give for Sabine? What did I have that the sea witch would desire as payment? That was the better question.

Suddenly, I was unsure if I was more terrified of what she would ask of me, or of finding out that the sea witch was nothing more than a myth.

Because if she could not help me, who could?

We made it to an area that was not the deepest part of the sea by any means, but it was the darkest, making it hard for even us merfolk to see. One of the stories about the sea witch said that, after she was betrayed by her one true love, her heart broke, letting the darkness within her leak out and fill the cavern she resided in.

It was not hard to find: we went where everyone told us not to go. Besides that, everything surrounding the darkness was either dead or dying, a sure sign that she was near.

She does not exist, I repeated to myself. It did not comfort me.

We paused just outside of the outer edge. There was a strange taste to the water, sharp and bitter, and it suddenly felt cold. The silence was deafening and tense, like there was something waiting to strike at any moment. But I could not sense anything nearby, not even a small fish.

Devere and I exchanged concerned looks.

“We can still turn back,” he whispered.

Instinctively, I almost did, the mockery of our older brothers be damned. But Sabine came to mind, how excited she was to hear of our adventure, and the questions flooded in once more, shoving the fear to the pit of my stomach.

“No.”

Devere dipped his head in acknowledgment and linked arms with me. “We stay together.”

Normally, being this close would have been cumbersome because our tailfins hit one another, but I was glad to have assurance of his presence as the darkness swallowed us whole, leaving us blind. The temperature dropped further the more we swam, and then I could feel a presence… more than one. Many. And they were close.

My shoulder scraped against something rough and sharp. Before I could yelp in surprise and prepare for an attack, the cavern lit up, making us

squint, and the chill fled, replaced with a soothing warmth. The moment my eyes adjusted, I was instantly drawn to the woman floating in the center of the cavern. While everything was bright and colorful, she emanated more light than the rest, a beautiful glow that made me want to come closer. The light obscured her features but gave the impression of her human shape, clothed in sheer fabric that slowly danced about her legs from a current unseen and unfelt by us. Her hair splayed about her, just as lively as her dress.

Merfolk circled around her, singing and saying lovely things in hopes of catching her attention. Some of them even showed off their tails in a dance meant to attract a mate.

“Raed?”

I followed my brother’s line of sight; my breath caught. Our oldest brother, one that went missing years ago, was at the feet of the floating woman.

“Raed!” Devere shot forward, and I followed.

The merfolk did not respond until we got close. Slowly, they turned their heads toward us—

Everything shifted, darkness replacing light, and we were surrounded by Condemned, all snapping their jaws at us as we scrambled to back away—

The floating woman hummed a simple note, and everything returned to as it was before, only this time, I sought out that familiar face, only to find it gone. There was another merman caressing the woman’s legs, his face unfamiliar. He looked nothing like…

…

Who had I thought he was?

“It seems we have visitors.” Every word from the woman’s mouth was sweet music, light and airy, soothing. “Come closer.”

I found myself obeying before I even had time to consider it. Fear twinged in my heart before releasing, slipping away with the reason of why

I should be alert. I paused, trying to find it again, but it was gone. It suddenly occurred to me how ridiculous I was being, paranoid when so many beautiful people were in the room. What did we possibly have to fear?

Devere stayed beside me, his eyes fixed on the woman. The closer we got, the more details I could make out, like the shape of her legs. Human legs.

Hope filled my chest at the thought of this woman sharing her secret of breathing underwater. I imagined Sabine's glee at exploring the sea with me, of visiting our palace—

The woman smiled, and I forgot what I was thinking about. "Two merfolk princes," she cooed in delight. "My my, but this is a treat. To what do I owe the pleasure?" I could barely make out her eyes in the light, but I could see them roam over both of us and linger on me.

"Are you—" Devere cleared his throat and tried again. "Are you the sea witch?"

Her features sharpened and, for a split second, terror breezed over me. Then the light brightened a bit more. "I have been known by many names." She laughed, and it came out as two separate sounds, the first melodious and the second bitter. The glow increased even more. "I suppose that is one of them. But you may call me Maire."

We repeated the name in unison.

She laughed again, this time only sweetly. "Now, Prince Caspian and Prince Devere, do you believe that I exist?"

My brother and I briefly exchanged surprised glances, unable to look away from her for long. How did she know that we doubted her very existence? How did she know our names?

"I will give you something to prove to your brothers that you did, in fact, find me." Her amusement was evident, almost like she enjoyed being a

part of the game. “But first, I believe Caspian has something he wishes to ask of me.”

If Devere also had something he wanted to ask, he said nothing, only nudged me when I kept staring at her. The merfolk still paid us no attention, having none left to spare since they heaped all of it on the sea witch—Maire. But she returned none of it to any of them, so why should she care about what I wanted?

“Now now,” she crooned, “no need to be shy. Come closer and tell me what you desire, sweet princeling.”

I found myself drawing close to her, close enough for her to reach out and run her fingers through my hair. And when she did, I leaned into her touch.

“I wish to fulfill your desire,” Maire assured me, “but you must speak it aloud. There is power in words, whether spoken or sung.” Her hand trailed down my neck to my chest and stopped over my heart. She cocked her head to the side as if listening. “It beats for her,” she murmured wistfully, her eyes half-lidded. “What a pretty song it is.”

“Sabine,” I said, the name bringing a smile to my face. Then for a horrible moment, I feared I had hurt Maire’s feelings, speaking of someone else in her presence.

But Maire smiled and pressed her palm harder against my chest. “Sabine. The human princess. My, but she is pretty. She will grow into a beautiful woman.”

Words poured forth before I could consider them. “I wish to make her happy. I wish for us to be able to be together, that is, if she does as well. She wants to explore the sea and wishes it was her home, but she can only have glimpses. She wants to be able to breathe underwater, to see and experience all that the sea has to offer.”

“You wish for her to have every dream her heart desires.”

“I… Yes.” Before I could lose the nerve, I blurted, “Is she my mate?”

Another smile. “No, my sweet. You do not have one. But her fate is closely tied to yours.”

I wondered if Devere had drawn closer as I had, but I could not look away from Maire, especially not when she was studying me so intently. It was like she could see into my soul, and I wanted to ask her to describe it. I hoped it was pleasing to her.

“I will make for you a dream bracelet,” Maire said finally. “You will give it to Princess Sabine and tell her to never remove it, because it will help grant the dreams that lead her in both waking and sleeping. And in exchange, you will give me three hairs and your favorite story about your family.” She leaned in closer, and I almost reeled away at the stench that assaulted my nose, but it was quickly replaced with a pleasant aroma. It was strange that I could not quite make out the details of her, like they were hazy at best. “Do we have a deal, princeling?”

Devere and I had said we would not make a deal unless we both agreed. I started to look his way, but Maire caught my chin with her free hand.

“I am making the deal with you alone, my sweet. I need your answer, not his.” The hand on my chest pressed harder. “Do we have a deal?”

The merfolk had moved with her, startled when she had done so abruptly. And now they turned their eyes toward me, their gleaming, colorless eyes…

“We have a deal,” I confirmed.

“Perfect,” Maire purred. She plucked three hairs from my head and settled back. The merfolk, seeming satisfied, returned to doting on her. I touched where her hand had been, the outline on my chest icy cold—

Maire drew my attention back with a flick of her wrist, and beautiful string appeared in her palm. The colors shifted lazily, drifting from one to the next as if it could not decide which one to settle on. She carefully tucked two of my hairs into the corset of her dress and began to weave the third into the colorful string.

“Tell me your favorite story, sweet princeling,” she implored. “About your family. Something you would share with Sabine.” Her fingers moved quickly and steadily, never missing a beat, and the merfolk kept their hands on her as they looked at me expectantly.

It did not take long for me to have an answer for her. “My favorite family memory is when Hedeon and Ammiras battled Monstri.” I described the great battle between two of our brothers and the vicious, huge shark that had been terrorizing our waters. Many had died trying to fight him, and I remembered Mother wishing The Fall had never happened, had never robbed us of our greater magic, for then we would have been able to defend ourselves and those who relied on us for protection.

But when Hedeon and Ammiras had returned victorious at last, Father proclaimed it was the sea god Njǫror testing our worth as guardians of the deep. We had won, and Father had proudly proclaimed that either of them would make an excellent King of the Sea someday. We had celebrated for a week, and that was the most joyous I had ever seen my family, especially my father. Even though it took Hedeon and Ammiras months to recover from their wounds, they joined the celebrations where they could and had plenty of mating offers.

“Your brothers are very brave and strong,” Maire commented after I finished the tale. Somehow, in that short amount of time, she had completed weaving the bracelet, making a pattern through it that resembled the one on my tail. She secured it around my wrist, the merfolk watching intently.

The bracelet thrummed, warm against my skin. Greater magic than I had ever felt. And I instantly knew Sabine would love it.

Maire gripped my wrist tightly. “Put this on her, and tell her never to remove it,” she reminded me.

I nodded. “How does it work?”

She offered me a sympathetic look I did not quite understand until she spoke. “I forgot how much your people lost in The Fall. Merfolk used to

make these, but they would fear it now, for it binds the soul. Sometimes it is even strong enough to change someone's fate. The magic will bind to her the moment it touches her skin, and it will help guide her to whatever her innermost dreams are."

I smiled, thinking that Sabine would get everything she wanted, but there was something about the way Maire said it that made me feel like there was a warning in her words if I listened hard enough.

She released me reluctantly. Two vials appeared in her hands, each filled with a strange dark liquid. How the seawater did not mix with it, I did not know. Maire carefully put one of my hairs in each, and the darkness swallowed them whole as she whispered "Hedeon" into one and "Ammiras" into the other.

"What are those for?" I could not help asking.

"For me" was her answer, and it left no opening for more questions. The vials disappeared.

"Now, Prince Devere," she said, looking over my shoulder, "you wish for proof of my existence." She beckoned him to her, and he waited beside me while she took a necklace from around her neck and put it around his. "This you will keep, for in exchange, you will remember me when Caspian has need of my help, and you will bring him to me. Are we agreed?"

"We are agreed," he confirmed.

Then, with one long, sharp nail, she cut off a lock of her hair and handed it to Devere. "Show your brothers this as proof."

"Thank you," he said as he cradled it in his hands.

Maire grinned and looked over us both once more. "I must be the one thanking you. I look forward to the next time you visit." She watched us leave but caressed the merman at her feet, playing with his curls. I managed one last peek at her before the darkness took us over and spit us back out into the sea we knew.

Devere shivered. "That was…"

Everything was too quiet. We exchanged glances, our brows furrowed and our mouths twisted into frowns.

“I wish we had found the sea witch,” I admitted.

Devere nodded sadly. “I do too.”

“Nothing but black and wreckage.” I played with the bracelet at my wrist, having nearly forgotten about it. “At least Sabine will like this.”

After a short while, we returned home in silence, the only thought on my mind was that I had to see Sabine and wished I did not have to wait until tomorrow.

The palace was still in the distance when two of our brothers, Numair and Zandrae, swam up to us.

“Where have you been?” Numair demanded. “Father and Mother have been sick with worry and sent everyone looking for you after you were not with the human princess.”

Zandrae nudged him with his tailfin. “Ease up, Numair. I bet they went looking for the sea witch.” The corner of his mouth quirked upward.

“We did,” Devere answered.

“And?” Zandrae pressed, and Numair seemed more interested.

“And…” Devere looked as confused as I suddenly felt. He opened his hand, which held something green and slimy. I had no idea what to make of it, or how he had even gotten it.

“What is that?” Zandrae asked, nose wrinkled. “It smells awful.”

Devere dropped it and shook his hand like that would rid anything lingering on him.

“Forget that: what is around your neck?” Numair went rigid, sight pinned on the necklace at Devere’s throat. A thin silver chain with a merfolk symbol carved into the pendant: Death.

“Remove it immediately!” Numair lunged at him, but Devere hissed and retreated, covering it with his hands.

“It is mine!” he cried as I shouted, “Leave it!”

We all stared at one another, Zandrae and Numair obviously waiting for an explanation, but I had nothing.

“We did not find her,” I said after the silence stretched to an uncomfortably long point. “All we found was the necklace.” Slowly, I moved my wrist behind my back. Fear gripped me at the thought of them trying to take the bracelet from me. It was for Sabine, no one else. I could handle my brothers’ mockery at what was obviously a trick disguised as a silly dare, but returning to Sabine with no stories to tell *and* nothing to give her would be too much.

“You win,” Devere said in defeat. “There was no sea witch, and you can laugh as much as you like. But at least let us keep what we found.”

They hesitated and exchanged looks but finally relented.

“Let us return home,” Zandrae suggested. “At last, Father has decided who between Hedeon and Ammiras will take the throne when he passes, and he wishes to announce it tonight.”

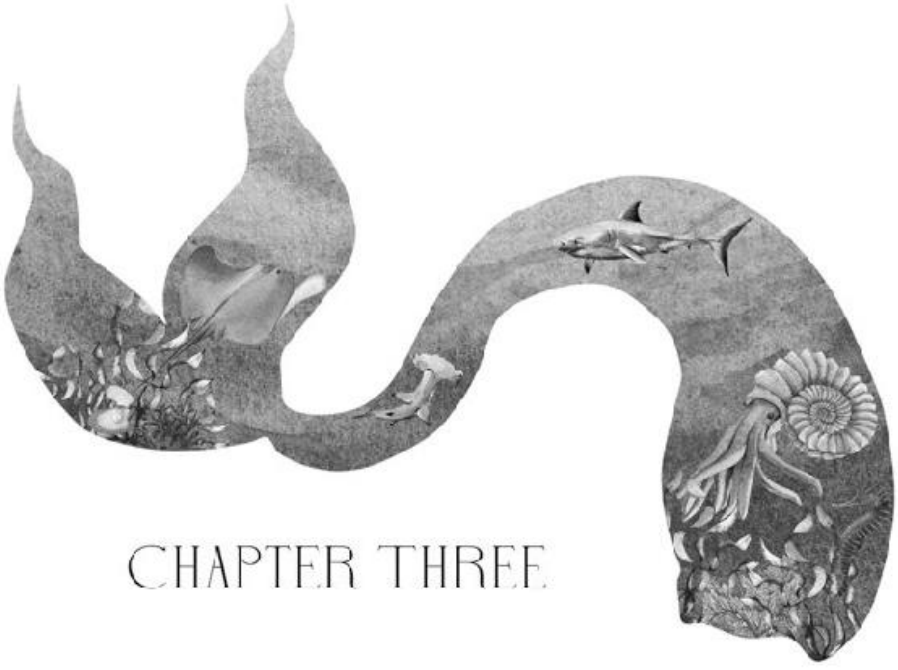
“Excellent!” Devere brightened up immediately and tugged on my arm. “Come, Caspian! I want to…” He looked at me. “What is the matter?”

I felt awkward, like something did not make sense that should have. But the more I tried, the more it felt wrong. “Has Father decided not to name one of his sons his successor?”

The three of them stared at me.

“I… I do not understand,” Devere responded. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I thought Father would choose one of us, his sons, to succeed him,” I answered, trying to make it as plain as I could. “Who are Hedeon and Ammiras?”



CHAPTER THREE

SABINE

We row to deep waters, where one of our father's ships is anchored. Laughter travels across the winds; I can see people hurrying about the deck, putting things together.

"A party on the ship?" I ask with a grin over my shoulder.

Oliver dips his head as he rolls his eyes. "You always have to know what is happening."

"It's rather obvious, Oli." I can only imagine who is invited and what other surprises are in store for me. If I had to take a guess, I would say at least one of my potential suitors is aboard, having arrived a week early. Which means I am in the wrong attire.

I stop rowing and look helplessly at my brother. "I should put the dress on, shouldn't I?"

Oliver offers a sympathetic smile as he hands me my clothes. "I would suggest it."

I stifle a groan. "Close your eyes."

Oliver does as he's told. I try to move as little as possible, trying to avoid rocking the boat. Nigh on impossible, but I manage, and even fix the ribbons into my hair in a simple style. With my sandy skin and half-dried hair, I'm sure I don't look properly groomed by any means, but it's better than nothing.

When we make it to the ship, Oliver goes up the ladder first. Voices hush. I hold back a snort and gracefully climb.

"Surprise!" everyone cries the moment I step onto the deck. A full orchestra plays a cheerful tune as my father and mother step forward.

"We wished to surprise our beautiful Princess Sabine with a birthday celebration before the suitors arrive to sweep her off her feet." My father

King Robert smiles widely and puts an arm around my shoulders, blocking me from my mother's mortified expression. "Enjoy the evening!"

The attendees raise their glasses and cheer. With how many people are in attendance, I take solace in the fact that none of the suitors are here.

That relief does not last long.

"Sabine!" Mor hisses at me, snatching my arm. Then she looks at Oliver, at his still-drying pants. "You said you would have her ready." Unlike me, our mother is every bit the image of royalty, what with her long, simple grey dress, silver and ruby jewelry, and perfectly done cosmetics. Not even a single hair in her bun is out of place.

"We're here, Mor," Oliver says. "Let Sabine enjoy her birthday."

"The boy is right," our father chimes in. "Go on, enjoy."

"Not until she at least looks like a princess." She half-drags me to the captain's cabin. Captain Bill steps aside and shoots me a sympathetic look as we disappear below deck.

"I had a feeling you would need these." Mor opens a trunk that is at the foot of the bed, pulling out a shift, corset, dress, slippers—everything to "fix" me. "Turn around," she orders, but whirls me anyway, as if she doesn't trust me to obey. Within seconds, my clothes are pooled about my feet, and she puts me in a dry, fresh shift and starts lacing me into the corset.

I breathe in as deeply as I can, but she flicks the back of my arm.

"It will not sit properly if you do that."

"It also won't be able to cut off my air."

She frowns at me through the mirror on the vanity on the other side of the small room, making the fine wrinkles around her mouth deepen. "If you kept to more ladylike activities, you would not be gasping for air."

I could argue with her, but this is something we've argued about plenty of times, and souring her mood will do little more than get her to shove me into more social activities to occupy my time. So I bite my tongue.

Mor tugs the lacing again, forcing the rest of my breath out in a grunt.

“Do you not want me to breathe?”

She raises a brow. “If you can sass me, you can breathe.”

Thankfully, my mother refrains from tugging again, instead tying off the lacing and moving on to the gown with the atrocious amount of beading.

“No need to use a fishing lure,” I mutter. “Just toss me overboard and I’ll attract all the fish.”

With a great sigh, she takes her time smoothing out the gown so that it sits properly. When she steps in front of me, I note the faraway look in her eyes and the way she purses her lips. An uneasy feeling twists my stomach.

“It is beautiful,” I say quietly. “Thank you. For this and the party. I know you went through a lot of trouble planning it.”

Her pale green eyes, the same color and shape as mine, lock on my face. Her expression softens, and she touches my cheek as she gives a small smile. “You know it is no trouble, my darling. I enjoy social gatherings… and I know you do not. But it is a part of your life, so you can at least try a little. For me?” She tucks a stray hair back into place and adds a pearl comb into my quickly done-up bun.

“Of course, Mor.” I kiss her cheek.

When I try to pull away, she whispers in my ear, “We will find time for you to be alone outdoors before the suitors arrive if you can promise me to give all of this a chance. Who knows? You may fall in love.”

My throat closes up instantly and my mind reels at the thought of letting go of Caspian.

As if she can sense the reaction, Mor steps back. “Come, we cannot leave our guests waiting any longer.”

The ache in my chest is raw and overpowering, so when we go above deck once more, I go in search of wine. People wish me a happy birthday as I pass them, and I do my best to nod and thank them, my voice slightly strained. One woman in particular, Duchess Amelia, is insistent on telling

me about how her nephew, Prince Lucas, will be arriving soon to pursue my hand in marriage.

“Even more handsome than his father,” Duchess Amelia gushes, cheeks flush and eyes bright as she sips her glass of wine. “And that is quite a statement, given how fond we all were of his father when we were adolescents. I wanted to strangle my sister when I found out she was the one who caught his eye.” She sighs dramatically and cools herself with a lace fan she waves idly. “But they are a perfect match, and I am certain you and my dear Lucas will be.”

I cannot force myself to smile. I know I’m gritting my teeth, thinking of the spoiled brat who tried to kiss me despite my refusal. All for a hurtful, stupid game for the boys of the royal court to see who could claim my first kiss.

“Well now, I will not pretend I have no idea of what happened between you as children, challenging him to a duel and giving him a black eye.” She shakes her head and taps my arm with her fan. “No need to worry, love. No one holds it against you anymore, least of all Lucas. That was years ago, and we all do silly things as children.”

Her chuckling grates on me, but not nearly as much as her flippant attitude toward the situation. As if it were fine to excuse Lucas’s behavior and that *she* is doing *me* a favor by forgiving me for defending myself. My fists clench at my sides, and for a moment, I consider giving her a black eye of her own. That would give everyone something else to gossip about, and they can keep their damn forgiveness because I won’t want it.

I catch sight of Oliver holding his infant son while he stands next to his wife. Mor comes to mind, and I manage to make myself breathe in as best I can. Once, twice…

Hitting Duchess Amelia would be unacceptable, but I could explain myself in no uncertain terms, showing her how backward her way of

thinking is. Mor would want me making nice with the guests, but she's been known to put people in their place here and there.

As I open my mouth to do just that, Oliver hurries over, an overly cheery smile on his face. "Duchess Amelia, a pleasure to see you here. Have you met my son?"

The woman's attention shifts to my nephew and she coos. Oliver glances at me and nods his head toward the refreshments. I silently thank him and make my escape.

The tables are piled high with various kinds of dishes and pastries, all simple things that can be eaten with just fingers. I have downed my second glass of wine and have a third pastry in my mouth before my little sister Sanne finds me.

"Were you swimming again?" She wrinkles her nose. I've heard others call her our mother's shadow, and I have to agree. Sanne is the proper princess who pleases everyone, Mor's ultimate dream for a daughter. She even looks like our mother, her skin just as fair and hair the perfect shade of warm brown. "That is not befitting a princess. You should have cleaned and dressed before arriving."

She is just a child, so I should let it go, but instead I swallow and give her a fake smile. "Good thing I am going to be an Ambassador of the Sea, not a princess." *Some Ambassador I am… No one answered my Call.*

I enjoy the befuddlement on my sister's face until she says, "We no longer need the merfolk."

That statement sinks to the bottom of my stomach like one of the metal discs in water. "They helped make our kingdom what it is."

But Sanne doesn't hear me: she is already chatting with some noble boys her age who will possibly become suitors in a few years. Mor is training her well.

Other than a few more birthday wishes, everyone is too caught up in their own conversations to speak to me. Not that I mind. I wipe off my

sticky fingers and disappear to the back of the ship to sit on the railing with my legs over the edge.

I could jump into the water from this height and be fine. I doubt anyone would notice until I was long gone. But swimming in any dress would be a hassle, especially this one with all of its layers and ruffles.

Storm clouds take over the sky, making it too dark to tell, but it looks like something is moving in the water. Maybe it's a trick of the eyes, the wind catching the surface just right…

When I don't see anything else, my heart sinks. If the merfolk did answer the Call, we weren't there to meet them. Maybe I can try again tomorrow if I can manage to sneak away. Hopefully the merfolk will understand if I explain…

"Thought I might find ye here, Goldie."

I glance over my shoulder to see Captain Bill approach, bottle of rum dangling from his tattooed fingers. He wears his usual attire, his hat and jacket looking just as weathered as he is, while his pants and shirt look relatively new, all things considering. At least he trimmed and combed his hair and beard—I assume Mor had something to do with that.

"How did my mother convince you to join the party? You hate parties as much as I do."

Bill lifts the bottle of rum. "This sweetened the deal. But ye know I never pass up something to do with ye." He stands near me, gripping the railing as he looks over the darkening waters. "I'm guessing ye had no luck Callin' Caspian."

I suddenly cannot look at him, and I wish I had swiped a third glass of wine.

Taking my silence as an answer, he offers his rum, and I take a hearty swig. It burns its way down my throat, and I welcome it.

"He'll answer," Bill says with such surety that I want to lean my head against his shoulder and borrow his strength. "That mer-boy was always

sweet on ye. Could be the merfolk be scared o' answerin' after so long."

I had not thought of that. I'd considered that the King and Queen of the Kingdom Below were being stubborn, and in my darkest nightmares, I'd even considered that the Condemned had wiped them all out, or worse, turned all merfolk into Condemned. But they have every right to be afraid of what us Calling them would mean, especially after how things ended five years ago. That is a long time to go without saying anything.

I'd silently hoped that Caspian would surprise me one day, that he would sneak to the surface just to see me… but I know that merfolk word is law, and the King would have made sure his subjects promised not to break the agreement my parents enforced.

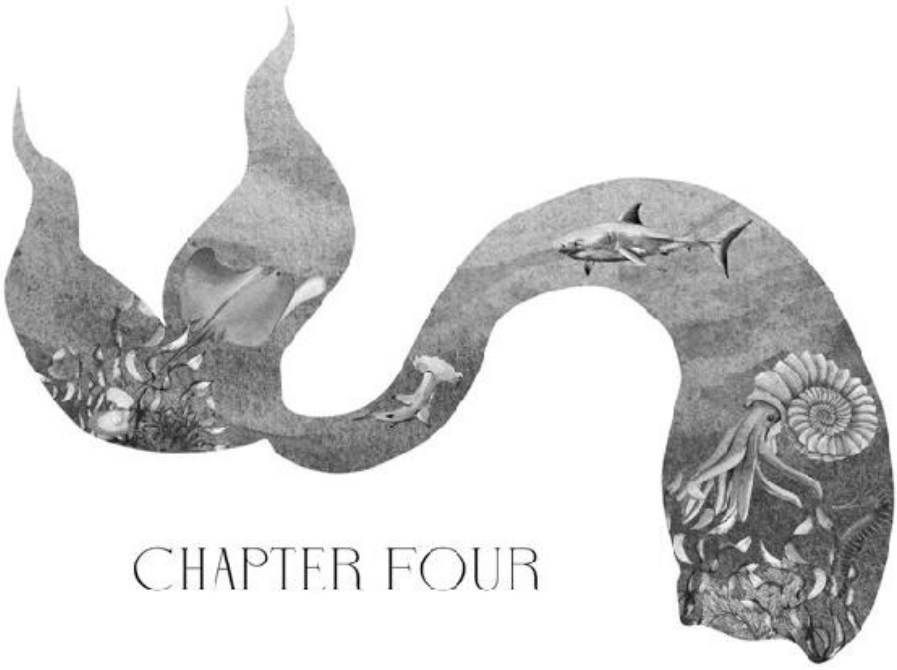
Still, I Called them… They are free to return, the consequences on my head alone.

"Don't lose hope, lass." Bill squeezes my arm before taking his leave.

Hope is the one thing I have left.

Rain pours, soaking me quickly. Guests cry out and clammer on the main deck, no doubt trying to find shelter. Meanwhile, I close my eyes and try to remember the way Caspian's voice seemed to wrap around me like an embrace. I touch the bracelet around my wrist, a frayed thing. "I hope you remember me, Caspian," I whisper into the strengthening wind.

I'm not at all prepared when lightning strikes the ship.



CHAPTER FOUR

CASPIAN

Devere follows me the entire way. We keep just enough distance to not be noticed while Sabine and Oliver row a few miles away from shore to reach the anchored ship awaiting them. I briefly see her face when she looks over her shoulder at him, which confirms who they are. Joy bubbles up within me, threatening to overflow.

Then she stands and awkwardly balances while changing. Their boat rocks dangerously close to tipping, so I slip under the water and steady it.

"You will be caught," Devere whispers.

I do not answer him. How can I, when the thought of her seeing me, recognizing me, fills me with excitement?

They row away again, this time reaching the ship.

"Humans are loud," Devere grumbles. "It is no wonder they attract so much attention."

I lose sight of Sabine when she climbs onto the main deck.

"Father will send people to look for us. We should return home."

After a moment of thought, I swim toward the back of the ship.

"Caspian!" Devere catches my arm. "We are far outnumbered here. The girl will surely play the song another day soon, and you can speak with her then, get into trouble then. Let us not risk how far our luck will carry us."

"You may return," I tell him. "I wish to see her."

"She is with her people, and a storm is coming." As he speaks, the wind pushes past us, tossing ever-growing waves. "Come, Caspian. We shall try again tomorrow." I yank out of his grip, and he sighs. "I will come back for you if you do not return home soon."

"Very well," I agree, and leave before he can change his mind.

The ship rocks with the erratic waves, and still the people celebrate. I swim to the back of the boat, fighting against the strengthening current. Normally, I would be in the deep, far away from such storms. But the humans seem unconcerned, continuing their celebrations.

I wait at the back of the boat. If Sabine is still the same, that is where she will go to take a brief break from the social gathering. I try to listen for her, but there is too much chatter and clinking glasses to make anything out.

Her voice… It sounded raspy, strained, so different than it used to be. It makes me wonder if that has to do with the Condemned attack… because I could have healed her if they had let me.

A figure climbs onto the ship railing and sits. It takes a little bit of maneuvering with how big her skirts are, but she manages.

Sabine.

She taught me that humans sometimes have the same name for different people—how confusing—but there is no mistaking her.

A male joins her, one I instantly recognize as Captain Bill. He is much more somber than I remember, with more wrinkles than five years ago when I last saw him. I try to listen to their conversation, but it is muddled with the sheer amount of noise. He offers her a drink, and she takes it greedily. They exchange a few more words, and then he leaves.

I surface as close as I dare to the ship. For a moment, Sabine stares down, and I think she sees me. My heart hammers against my chest, and I hold my breath, waiting. I do not know how much she can see in the water as the sky is turning dark, and startling her is the last thing I want.

She says something I cannot quite make out over the rushing gales. A tingling feeling travels my skin, warning me of the dangers of the coming storm.

But I cannot leave. She is still on the edge, eyes closed, touching her wrist. I open my mouth to yell in hopes she will somehow hear me when a

flash of light strikes the ship, blinding me temporarily and throwing me back under the sea. Thunder roars so loud that it reverberates in my chest.

It takes me a moment to gather myself. By the time my eyesight returns and I make it back to the surface, the ship is burning. Shouts and screams pierce the night as passengers scramble about, trying to find rowboats to use for escape. Smoke billows and fills the air.

Sabine is no longer on the ship.

My chest tightening, I look about the floating debris for any signs of her. But the rolling waves and high winds constantly shift everything and toss it every which way.

I dive under and breathe, thankful to get the smoke out of my lungs. *Think.* She has to be somewhere nearby, undoubtedly thrown from the ship when the lightning struck.

I inhale deeply, then exhale as hard as I can. Magic takes my breath and runs into the distance. After a few seconds, it hits something and bounces back, but it is too small to be her. I try again. This time, the magic does not return, finding nothing in its path. Again. And again.

When it feels like panic is about to cleave my chest in two, I find her.

I tear through the water. She kicks and flails her arms, bubbles escaping her mouth in little streams, but she still sinks slowly as her dress winds itself around her legs. She changes tactics, undoes the stays enough to wiggle out, and then undoes some more when it is not enough.

I reach her quickly; she jolts, eyes wide, and I realize she must not be able to see me clearly. The rest of her precious air ejects in a burst of bubbles. Her pupils narrow at the realization, at the hopelessness of the situation. She convulses.

I pull her to me and shoot for the surface. The wretched dress weighs more than Sabine, and it somehow wraps behind me and catches on the thin, sharp spines of my tail. I swim harder to compensate, noting that Sabine has gone limp in my arms.

Hold on. Please, hold on.

We break the surface, re-enter a world of smoke and storms. But Sabine's head falls to the side, unresponsive. Waves thrash about us as I open her mouth and put two fingers on her tongue. Magic begins to trickle into her when the water submerges us once more, undoing my progress. In a panic, I close my gills, cover her mouth with mine, and inhale, taking in the water from her lungs, and then exhale, hoping I have enough air to give her.

Please work.

Her chest expands, and I wait until we are above water again to pull away. I yank her dress off my tail and tear the rest of it from Sabine, leaving the shreds to sink into the deep. Then I rush for the shore. I am faster below water, but keeping Sabine's head above it is imperative, so I compensate how I can.

By the time we make it to the beach, my body aches. I lay her on the sand, then drag her up further in an awkward crawl when the raging waters keep grabbing at us, threatening to suck us back in.

Rain continues to beat down in heavy sheets. I press my ear to her chest. A soft sound greets me weakly.

"I just found you again," I say. "You will not slip away so easily." Because now that I can see her face, I see the details, the hints of the girl I used to know who is now a woman.

I touch her tongue again, and this time the magic does its work uninterrupted, finding what water I could not get. It rushes back up, and I turn her on her side so it can drain. Sabine coughs and trembles; I hold her steady, but her breathing is still shallow, her chest barely rising, and I realize it is the corset, having heard plenty of complaints about them.

Extending a claw, I roll her onto her side and slice through the lacing holding the corset together, then cast it aside, leaving her in a thin shift.

I wish there was shelter nearby, somewhere she can get dry and warm. All around us is water and sand, nothing more. The palace is inland, and I

cannot hope to make it there crawling and dragging her. So, when she calms and falls into a steady breathing rhythm, I pull her against me, cradling her with my body as best I can. The storm rages around us, but Sabine is alive and breathing… and she still has the dream bracelet. So I take heart.

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

CASPIAN

I swam into the cave to find Sabine already there, frowning as she studied a book. She sat on the edge, dangling one bare foot in the water while the other was tucked underneath her.

"What are you reading?"

She looked up instantly and found me rising out of the water. I lifted myself onto the cave floor so that I sat beside her, careful to give her enough space to keep from splashing her and her book.

"Mormor gave it to me," she answered, pushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. The rest was loosely braided as if done quickly, but I knew she was still learning to do it herself. "It's about merfolk symbols." She waved a hand like it did not matter much. "How was your adventure? Did you find the sea witch?" Her eyes brightened.

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Well, no. Nothing but wreckage, unfortunately. Just our brothers trying to play a trick."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

I scooted a little closer to her. "No need to be. I would have preferred to be here with you anyway."

We shared a smile before I inspected the page she was on. Merfolk symbols covered it, alongside bits of the human language. From what I could read, the humans thought they had an idea of the meanings but were slightly off.

"I don't understand some of this," she admitted. Before I could ask, she pointed to a more simplistic symbol. "They say that this means 'friend'… but then it looks like this symbol makes up part of this one, and that… they say that means… 'spouse'?"

I frowned. “They are partly correct. The first one” —I let my fingers brush hers as I pointed— “does mean ‘friend’ in its most basic sense. Someone you care about and trust completely. And the second one… What was that word you used?”

“Spouse. It means husband or wife. Or mate, I suppose. Do merfolk get married?” Sabine turned to look at me, nearly making our noses touch.

“Not quite the same way you do, as far as you have told me,” I said softly, my eyes locked on her pale green ones. I had decided shortly after meeting her that green was my favorite color. “We choose one person… and I suppose we have a ceremony of sorts. But that symbol means more than ‘mate’: it means ‘One who is my heart.’” My words came out slowly, carrying a weight that could be felt throughout the cave. Sabine did not look away, not even for a moment.

“That is beautiful,” she murmured.

I closed the gap between us with a kiss. Sabine smiled against my mouth, scooted closer—

—and nearly dropped the book into the water. She snatched it, held it to her chest, and took a few breaths.

“Perhaps I should put this somewhere safe.”

Hoping the moment was not completely ruined, I nodded. “I think that would be for the best.”

While Sabine hurried to return the book to the shelf, I pulled the woven bracelet from my wrist.

“What is that?” Sabine asked as she sat down beside me again, this time shoulder-to-shoulder.

“It is a gift.”

“Oh! Where did you get it?”

“I…” As hard as I tried to remember, the thought slipped from me… but then I finally remembered. “I made it.” How could I forget something like that?

“How sweet! Thank you, Caspian.” She extended her slender wrist, and I secured the bracelet around it, careful to tie it tighter than when I had worn it. The moment it was tied off, a small pulse went through me, a tingling sensation that left me feeling like something had been activated.

“…What was that?”

“You felt it?” I asked. She nodded. “I… I have no idea.”

Pursing her lips, Sabine studied the bracelet. “Does this have magic?”

I answered, “A bit, not much. This is a dream bracelet, meant to give good fortune to those we… care about.” That brought her gaze back up to mine. I had to wonder if she could hear my heart beating loudly like I could… but with the way the pulse in her neck was pounding, hers might have been just as loud.

This time, Sabine was the one who leaned in—

“Afternoon, fellow sea-lovers!”

We jolted and turned toward the entrance of the cave, where an older man strolled in wearing a weathered captain’s hat and jacket.

He grinned at us. “Looks like I be right ’bout the ‘lovers’ part.”

I flicked my tail in agitation but managed a half-hearted smile. “Good afternoon, Bill. What is the full name and title today?”

“We both know his real name is William,” Sabine said. But I could tell by her tone that she enjoyed his ridiculousness, even if he had just interrupted our moment.

“Never William.” Bill’s expression soured and he shook his head. Then, standing up straighter, chin held high, he proclaimed, “I be Captain BillLeon Weatherford, widely known as The Lucky Pirate.” He gave an exaggerated bow. “Ye be ready for today’s adventure?”

CHAPTER FIVE

CASPIAN

I wake still holding Sabine. Everything is dry, stiff, and sandy, but I cannot bear to move. Through barely parted lips, her soft breaths tickle my shoulder. I brush strands of her hair back, but her face is so close to me that I cannot study it like I want to.

I tense at the realization that she is wearing very little, only a shift covering her. Merfolk have no reason to cover anything, but humans are very different, holding to an idea called modesty. We had to be rid of the dress and corset, but will she believe me when she wakes nearly naked in my arms?

Will she even recognize me?

From this angle, I can see the outer edges of the scarring on her neck, the knotted and pinched flesh that stands as a reminder of what happened that day with the Condemned. It pains me.

But she is alive and here with me for the moment, so I will be grateful for that.

My skin feels too tight, too dry, and I am very aware of how she is pressed against me. I lean back; she curls into me.

A smile flees my mouth the instant I hear dogs bark and people shout.

SABINE

That voice. It cradles me, draws me close, its tone promising me things I cannot quite remember but I know are the desires of my heart and soul.

“I am sorry, Sabine,” he says as he touches my wrist.

Barking. Shouting.

Why does everything sound so far away except him?

Him… It takes effort to open my sand-crusted eyes. Sunlight blinds me. “Why?” My question comes out in a cracked whisper, my throat aching.

“I must leave. But I will return.”

I open my eyes again, this time forcing myself to focus, willing my foggy mind to clear. But when I finally do, he is already gone, and all that’s left are drag marks in the sand and ripples in the water.

Water.

“Caspian?” I murmur. No, that would be too lucky, too coincidental. Even Captain Bill, The Lucky Pirate, would say no one is allotted that much luck in one lifetime.

But something—or someone—saved me. There was someone in the water just before I lost consciousness. I’d thought it was one of the Condemned…

I hear people in the distance, drawing closer. I stand, ignoring my aching, bruised body. “Here!” I try to shout, but my dry throat gives out. It doesn’t matter: they are heading toward me and will see me soon enough.

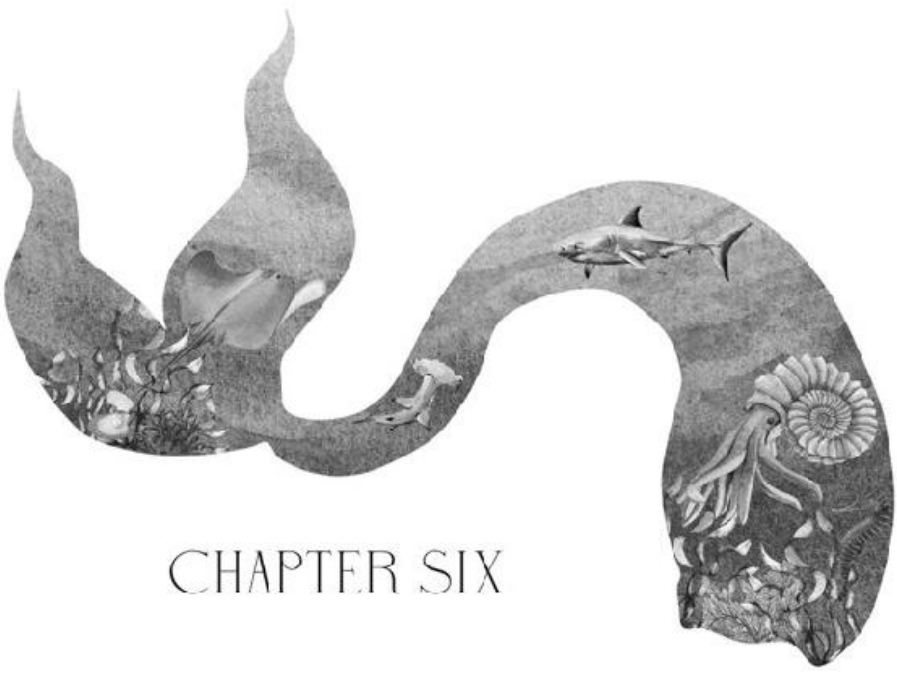
I brush the sand from my arms and look down in shock. I’m nearly naked, covered only by my sandy shift. The corset is nearby, the lacing shredded. *What happened to my dress?* I mean, good riddance, but I’d prefer to be decent when the others find me.

Out of habit, I reach for the bracelet at my wrist to play with it—but it’s gone, nowhere to be found. Panic surges. I search the beach, even search

the edge of the water. But it is so frayed… for all I know, it could be at the bottom of the sea now.

The pain in my chest is worse than all the pains in my body. I can’t breathe, can’t think, can barely stand on my wobbly knees.

I’ve lost my last physical reminder of Caspian. And without the dream bracelet, will I find a way to be with him again?



CHAPTER SIX

CASPIAN

I watch Sabine from the water. Her movements are slow, as if she is under a spell. She stands, then panics, searching everywhere for something.

I fix the bracelet around my wrist and keep out of her sight. I am not sure what possessed me to take it, but I cannot return it right now: her people find her, cover her with a cloak, and give her fresh water to drink.

They will take care of her, I tell myself as if that will convince me to leave her.

And I lied, I know why I took the bracelet: it is proof that Sabine is still my Sabine. She is alive and well and kept my gift around her wrist like she promised. She *kept* it.

The dream bracelet is fraying but still holding together. *I can fix it.* A dangerous thought…

"Caspian!" Devere hugs me from behind, turns me around to examine me. "I told you the storm was coming, I knew I should have stopped you __"

"It is her." I grin.

Devere looks at me like I have lost my mind. "You nearly died."

"She was the one in danger," I point out. "I saved her."

My brother nods and says, "You can tell me the story later. She is with her people now. Come, Mother and Father are panicking. They sent everyone out to find you."

Reluctantly, I go with him. Devere tries to go faster, but when I do not match his pace, he falls back beside me and notes the way I touch the dream bracelet.

"Is that…"

I try to hide it. “I—”

“Is that the one you gave Sabine?” He grabs my arm and frowns. “Why did you take it from her?” I scramble for an answer, but the truth dawns in his eyes when he sees the way it is coming apart. He gently touches it as if he is afraid even that would be its undoing.

“We cannot let it break. We have to fix it.” I silently beg him to understand. Our people lost our more powerful magic like this in The Fall, and we were lucky I could make this at all. There would be no replacing it, and no matter how it happens, regardless of if I am a part of them or not, I want Sabine to get every dream her heart desires.

Devere’s pupils shrink drastically. I am about to ask him what is wrong when something icy slithers up my spine and wraps around my mind. A flood of memories washes through me, leaving me breathless and in shock.

We found the sea witch when we were children, and we bartered for the dream bracelet. Making it was never within our capabilities, not with all we had lost in The Fall. And, now that I need her again, she is allowing us to remember so that we can return to her. She is certain we will not tell of her, because otherwise she will not help me fix Sabine’s dream bracelet.

Horror runs through me as I realize three of our brothers are Condemned, and I remember seeing our oldest brother Raed with her. She has him, at least. And Ammiras and Hedeon were among the Condemned who attacked the day Sabine was injured and her grandmother was killed, but they got away before our people had to make the tough decision on whether or not to kill them.

The pendant around Devere’s neck pulses a reddish, almost black, color. He stares down at it thoughtfully, processing just as I am. Then he slowly looks up at me. “I have to take you to her.”

“I know.”

A muscle in his jaw twitches. “But first we will return home to assure Mother and Father that you are well.”

In silence, we swim toward the palace again, its lights glittering in the distance. My skin welcomes the water, how it eases the aches and soothes the irritations the sand left behind. And here, in the dark, I can see. In the World Above the sun is too bright, overpowering my senses and leaving me squinting. My eyes are meant to draw in as much from the dark as they can, to see the other creatures that live in the deep as we do.

Even so, I crave the World Above. I want to be back on the shore with Sabine, despite the heat and dryness.

Not nearly as many guards are on duty in the city, no doubt scouring the sea depths for me. The ones stationed at the side entrance we approach are robust, much more muscular and broader than we are. Perfect builds for soldiers.

“Prince Caspian! Prince Devere!” one of them says. “It is good to see you alive and well. Your father will be pleased to see you. He is in the throne room.” The words do not quite match the underlying tone. They know what is coming for us when our father sees us, same as we do. We continue anyway.

Glowing moss sticks to random places, giving natural light as it slowly grows, spreading throughout the city. The largest patches are closer to the palace, as if leaving a path there. Merfolk see us swim by, pausing briefly before whispering to one another and pretending to return to their work. With how quickly gossip spreads through our people, I would not be surprised if Father finds out we are here before we reach the throne room.

Other sea creatures pass through our city unhindered. Dolphins often come to play and get delicacies we create, and sea turtles bring their young for safety. Many creatures seek our help, mostly from injuries due to traps from the World Above. We know human ways and can cut away the snagged nets, as well as remove hooks from their mouths and fins.

A lone shark swims above us. No one moves to stop him, but all keep a wary eye open. He knows better than to attack—he might overpower a few

creatures and merfolk, but we would take him down without a second thought and leave his carcass at the entrance to the city for the bottom feeders to pick clean.

A slope leads up to the palace, which glows brighter than everything else around it. We barely make it halfway before Father appears, hurrying out of the palace to meet us, Mother at his tail.

“Caspian!” Mother pushes past Father to embrace me. “Are you hurt?” She inspects me, moving my arms and face this way and that. Her touch is gentle, and bits of magic trickle from her fingertips to mend whatever abrasions she can find. I cannot blame her for her nervousness when she has already lost three of her seven sons.

“I am well, Mother.”

“Where were you?” Father demands. For all the hard lines in his expression, I can see the hint of relief in his eyes and the way his gills and tail relax slightly. “Why were you Above?”

It figures he knows where I was. Subtly, I move my wrist behind my back while running a hand through my hair to redirect their attention. Devere might understand, but Father and Mother certainly will not. “I answered the Call.”

“That was not your decision to make.”

“I did not want them to think we are ignoring them, that we have abandoned them.”

“*They* abandoned *us*.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from continuing that all-too-familiar argument.

“It could have been a trap,” Mother says softly. “I know you had a friend Above, but there was too much to risk, Caspian. They could have taken you captive, possibly even killed you.”

“But they did not.” I know the words are a mistake before I say them.

“You will not answer the Call again,” Father orders. “We will deal with this as we see fit.” I say nothing; Father sighs. “Did you see them?”

“They were not there when we arrived,” Devere answers for me.

“Then why did you take so long to return home?”

No one is close enough to hear us, but I suddenly wish we were discussing this in Father’s private chambers, not in the open water. It feels like speaking Sabine’s name would expose her to the entire sea and its inhabitants.

“The storm wrecked the royal family’s ship. I saved one of them.”

Father eyes me, clearly annoyed at having to draw the truth from me bit by bit. “Your friend the princess, I presume?”

I nod once.

Our parents are quieter than I expect. Mother looks at Father, but he is still staring at me intently.

“That may work to our advantage. She will no doubt tell her family.”

If she even saw me and remembers me.

Father squeezes my shoulder. “You will remain here at the palace. When the next Call comes, you will answer it with me. Perhaps the princess will be there again and speak on our behalf.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

SABINE

No one can come up with a good reason why I was nearly naked on the beach or how I survived. My parents quickly silence the jokes around my immodesty, but the questions around my survival fade for everyone else while they haunt me.

The only answer that makes sense to me is that one of the merfolk saved me. I want to believe it was Caspian, but there are so many of their kind that it could have been. Still, who else would have risked saving a human?

I saw my rescuer briefly before I lost consciousness. All I could make out was black hair and large eyes. I instantly panicked at seeing a creature swim up to me that rapidly while I was trying to rid myself of that godawful gown. It was too dark to catch details, and I passed out moments later.

Then there was his voice… Melodious, as merfolk voices tended to be, and so familiar. I want it to be Caspian's, but I am too afraid my heart is filling in the blanks my mind cannot fill.

"I will return," I murmur, repeating his final words to me. But he was not there the next day or the day after that. Suitors are coming soon, and I will run out of chances to meet my mystery savior once they arrive.

I run my fingers over my wrist and sigh, although it does nothing to ease my aching heart. Caspian warned me about losing it, telling me that the more I lost my dreams, the more it would fray until it finally broke. Did it sense my despair when I nearly drowned?

Did I actually die? That would make it break, as far as I understand it. Merfolk carry magic, so it is not impossible for them to bring me back to life… except I thought the more powerful magic was lost in The Fall.

I get out of bed and start to dress when Mor and maidservants enter with barely a knock as a warning.

“Good, you are awake.” Mor smiles and gestures. The servants hold up fabrics next to my face to show the colors. “No, not that one. Try the pink. Hmmm… no. The blue?”

“What is this dress for?”

Mor shakes her head in amusement. “Your birthday ball, of course. Suitors from all over will come to meet you, and you want to be sure they know what a prize they will get.” She notices my face. “Do not frown so, darling. You know it is an honor to be so highly sought after.”

“Will I get to choose?” I ask instead of using the myriad of sarcastic responses I have.

“Yes. Then your father and I will approve the match, and you will be married.” To the servants: “That one suits her skin tone better. Perhaps we can have this one as an overlay?”

“So I don’t get to choose.”

Mor blinks in confusion. “Of course you choose, but your father and I have final say.”

Servants take my measurements even though I’m sure they haven’t changed much since the last measuring a month ago.

“And what if I don’t want to marry any of them?”

Mor raises a single brow. “I am sure you are too mature to be difficult for the sake of spite.”

We lock eyes for a few tense moments. I have always known what it means to be a princess: I am a trading piece to bring about goodwill and alliances between kingdoms. I am to listen and obey and smile and curtsy and wed and bear children. I’m sure those things would be at least tolerable with the right person…

“Get dressed. Breakfast will be ready shortly.”

Mor leaves, and only two servants remain to style my hair and dress me.

I have to try to see Caspian one more time.

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

SABINE

Captain Bill and Caspian waited at the boat for me to change out of my dress and into my adventuring clothes—better known as Oliver's shirt and trousers. I forewent shoes because I did not own a pair of boots… and because shoes of any kind only held me back from swimming with Caspian.

But first, we had to sail.

I hopped into the rowboat. "Where are we exploring today?"

Caspian folded his arms on the side of the boat, waiting for the answer as much as I was.

Bill grinned at me. "Always so eager, Goldie."

I wrinkled my nose; of the plethora of nicknames I had, that was one of my least favorites, but somehow, it was tolerable if Bill was the one calling me it. Usually. I assumed it had to do with the color of my hair… because I couldn't think of another reason.

Caspian tried to smother his amusement by hiding the lower half of his face behind his arms. I shot him a fake glare before redirecting my attention to the pirate.

"Easy there, lass. Just some light teasin'." Bill ran a hand over his grey beard. In certain lighting, I could see hints of red, like there was a stubborn part of him that refused to accept growing old. "I've just the place fer us. Small sandbar, just a mile and a half that way. There be a drop-off with wreckage to explore."

"Then let's be off!" I grabbed the oars and began to row. Caspian dove under the water, swimming in the direction our captain had indicated. The water was clear enough that I could still see him when I peered over, marveling at how easily he maneuvered in the sea.

“Distracted, lass?”

I shifted my focus and lifted my chin. “Don’t merfolk fascinate you?”

Bill chuckled. “Not in the same way, I imagine.”

I rowed harder, fighting the urge to stick out my tongue at him.

“They be beautiful creatures, indeed. But once they try to drown ye… well, that gives ye a bit o’ healthy fear. And respect.”

“Caspian wouldn’t do that to me.”

The sun beat down on us as Bill stared at me thoughtfully. Faded tattoos covered his knuckles and the backs of his hands, and peeked out from his shirt collar and jacket sleeves. When serious, he looked to be a fearsome pirate, making you keep a hand near your weapons and double-check your valuables were safe.

“Perhaps not,” he conceded slowly. “But ’tis in their nature, so best be careful. Aye?”

No. I wanted to wallop him over the head, to remind him he’d known Caspian since we were small children. But Mormor gave me the same warnings every so often… “Aye.”

He offered a sympathetic smile.

The rest of the time was filled with the pirate telling his usual outlandish stories, ones I had no idea whether to believe or not. They lifted my mood, but our first conversation gnawed at the back of my mind.

We finally arrived at a small sandbar, barely big enough for the three of us. But we weren’t there to stand around, so after we secured the boat, the three of us entered the water.

“Ye know the way,” Bill said. “Check what ye can and bring everything back to the boat. If ye see trouble, get out o’ the water right away.”

“Aye,” Caspian and I said simultaneously.

With a nod, Bill dove underwater, us right behind him.

It was a relief to have cold water wash away the sweat coating my skin. I paused a moment to take in the feel of the sea all around me like a

welcoming hug: the soundlessness, the weightlessness, the schools of brightly colored fish swimming about the reefs and coral, the vast expanse ready to be explored.

To me, this was home.

Caspian offered his hand, and I took it. Part of me wished I could intertwine our fingers, but with the webbing between his, that made it difficult.

He gave a smile and then took off, pulling me along with him. I knew he could go faster if he wanted, but he kept a pace I could handle. His tailfin brushed against my leg every so often as I kicked, wishing I had a tail of my own to make swimming easier. And if I did, then I wouldn't have to wear those awful heels Mor always insisted on.

After Caspian let me go to the surface for air, we made our way down a drop-off, and the wrecked ship came into sight, broken pieces lying about or partially sticking out of the sand, nestled by the seaweed. Parts were charred and black, making me wonder if fire had been its undoing.

We went to the back of the ship where the captain's cabin was. An eel slithered by, eyeing us; I leaned into Caspian to avoid bumping it.

"He will not attack you," Caspian assured me. Somehow, being underwater made his voice even more enchanting. "Most creatures want to avoid an altercation with us."

I knew the "us" meant merfolk. They were the guardians and peacemakers of the sea, one of the deadliest creatures of the deep.

The captain's words came back to me, and I was a little late in shoving them down.

Caspian frowned. "You look upset. Is something the matter?"

I shook my head.

"I do not believe you." He sighed. "I wish you could speak underwater."

We both did.

In between trips to the surface for air, we explored the captain's cabin… or what was left of it. I checked the skeletons just like Captain Bill taught me, being sure to undo the soles of boots and look for secret pockets in the lining of clothes. It used to make me squirm, but I'd learned to fear living things. The dead had nothing left they could do to you.

We found naught but small trinkets and worthless paper, the ink long bled away into the watery depths. I brought the trinkets with me to the boat, taking care to place them nicely in case something broke. Bill had just stopped teasing me about last time…

Caspian peered over the side of the boat, inspecting the loot. "There might be a few good finds in there."

"Perhaps."

With a side-eyed glance, he nudged me with his elbow. "You, my dearest Sabine, are never satisfied no matter what we find."

"A good pirate never is," I replied, pointedly trying not to let my gaze drift lower than his eyes, which became all the harder when he smiled.

"Well said, Goldie."

Both of us jumped as Bill swam toward us. He pulled himself up and over, grunting, and then poked and prodded the trinkets. Behind him, his jacket was folded nicely, his boots and hat on top. He wouldn't put them on yet, I knew, not until after he dried off a bit.

I always wondered what went through Bill's mind when he evaluated the worth of whatever we found. He gave me answers sometimes, the reasons for one being so high in value being the same reason why something else later was so low.

"Not bad," the captain said slowly, stroking his beard. "But I agree with Goldie: we can do better. Off with ye now, one more try." He waved us away with a twinkle in his eye.

Caspian and I didn't have to be asked twice: we returned to the deep. He scooped me into his arms, and I knowingly held onto his neck before he

took off quicker than before. I closed my eyes as the pressure of the water around us became too great, and then opened them again when Caspian slowed to a stop.

This time he'd brought me to what used to be the bow of the ship. The front half was tilted upward like it had tried reaching for the surface even as it was sinking to the bottom. When Caspian released me, I planted my feet on the edge of the ship and locked an arm around the bowsprit. Mor always chastised me whenever I climbed onto it, saying it was too narrow and easy to fall off of, especially if we hit rough waters. But I could not climb to the crow's nest in a dress, so the bowsprit seemed like the next-best place to look out on the horizon and imagine the wonderful places we could discover.

I looked at Caspian, admired the way his long, dark hair swayed about gently. He studied me just as intently, the corner of his mouth curving up. In the darker depths, his blue eyes seemed to glow like jellyfish.

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, and I shivered when one of his claws grazed my neck. I unhooked my arm and turned toward him, leaving my back against the bowsprit.

Here, it was quiet, it was peaceful, and with Caspian, it felt like home.

"Beautiful," he murmured, and kissed me. All worries and cares disappeared, my thoughts shifting to one thing: Caspian. I ran my fingers through his silky strands and enjoyed every little touch, so gentle and careful, like I was precious to him.

Warmth bloomed in my chest, even as I began to run out of air. Caspian seemed to sense it and, instead of letting me go, he pulled me to him. Instinctively, I gasped, taking in water, and began choking. He tightened his grip on me and shot to the surface.

For a few seconds, it felt like air would never return to my lungs. Then I finally coughed up seawater and was acutely aware of Caspian staring.

When I caught my breath, I insisted, “Stop looking at me like that. I’m fine.”

Even though there was still a bit of concern in his expression, Caspian joked, “As much as I wish it were so, you know humans cannot breathe underwater, correct?”

I gave a sarcastic, half-hearted laugh. Bill’s words crept back in, but I slammed the door to my mind shut again. This merman was trying to make sure I could breathe, not trying to drown me.

Caspian dragged his gaze to the sun painting the sky in rich oranges and golds. “Bill will be waiting for us.” He smirked. “So we had better be quick.”

I grinned as he embraced me and dove back under. His tail propelled us, bumping my legs every so often. I knew better than to try to swim while we were like this—it only made things more difficult, getting in his way.

He stopped abruptly, his grip on me tightening. I peered up, but he was looking elsewhere, scanning the dark distance. He’d gone tense; his claws pricked my skin. There was nothing different I could see, nothing to cause such alarm. And yet I felt something… like we were being watched.

Then I heard the shriek.

I was still recuperating, still feeling the way the sound stabbed through my chest, when Caspian flipped us around and took off at speeds that had me clinging to him and squeezing my eyes shut. My stomach flipped. My chest tightened. An icy chill seeped through everything and took over my body.

Another shriek, this time closer. So much closer.

Just when I thought the dizziness was going to overtake me, we hit the surface with a splash that nearly tipped over the rowboat.

“Git in, both o’ ye!”

Caspian all but tossed me in, and Bill snatched his wrist before he could dive back under.

“Three o’ them to one o’ ye,” he pointed out. “Git in.”

Caspian opened his mouth to argue but halted when Bill grabbed a revolver from behind his back, the one he always kept on him. Mormor had engraved merfolk symbols into the metal, and all Caspian would say about their meanings was “death.” But the gun’s power came not from the symbols, but the magic crystals it was made with, crystals only found at the bottom of the sea. How they helped exactly, Captain Bill could not explain other than swearing their power had saved his life on more than one occasion.

Without a word, Caspian obeyed, making the boat rock dangerously with the extra weight. His fin hung over the side, his tail too long for the boat.

“What’s happening?” I sputtered, wanting to lean over to look but too terrified that would flip us over. “What’s after us? Sharks?”

“Worse,” Bill answered as he stood and carefully aimed at the water. “The Condemned.”

The word solidified the icy fear in my veins. Mormor had told me tales of the merfolk who had lost their minds and souls to a sea witch, bartering much and losing everything. Caspian refused to speak of them, but I had overheard sailors swap stories of haunting songs, sharp teeth and claws, and bloody waters.

Caspian leaned toward me just before the first shot went off. Instead of making a splash, the bullet zipped through the water and hit a shadowy figure, cutting off the next shriek that was building. Blackish tendrils that looked eerily like blood snaked toward the surface.

“Row,” ordered Captain Bill, and I scrambled to snatch the oars. “If we leave while they be distracted, we might have a chance.”

I ignored the burn in my arms, just kept rowing and rowing. Even when he finally sat down, I maintained pace. The chill remained, refusing to thaw despite the sweat slipping down my face and neck. Now that the sun had

slipped away, the clouds covering the moon leaving nothing but an inky blackness, my mind was left to manifest visions of gnashing teeth and ripping claws—

“They could be following us.” Caspian’s usually confident voice wavered.

The lanterns at the docks were my only guide. We always brought torches, but they remained unlit, and I preferred they stay that way.

They could be following us.…

“No,” Bill said dismissively. “They be picking clean the bones o’ the one I shot.”

An unpleasant shiver, sharp and intrusive, cut down my spine.

“Give me the oars.”

I let Bill take them from me. Caspian shifted so he could wrap me in his arms, and I rested against his chest. His heart beat loud and fast in my ear, and I let that anchor me in the midst of my storming emotions.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CASPIAN

Devere and I wait until Father and Mother are preoccupied before we slip out of the palace. The other guards have not returned from searching for me, so bypassing one of them with Devere's help is easy. We know the guards' patterns, where to hide and sneak past.

We are not considered the king's restless sons for nothing.

I can feel the invisible pull toward the sea witch—Maire—and I do not have to ask to see that Devere feels it too. Everything in us needs to go to her, not just because of Sabine and her dream bracelet. But what will she ask of me to fix it? She had me give her something last time… a memory… that I cannot quite remember. I know she got me to talk while she made the dream bracelet and took three of my hairs, one for the bracelet and two for potions she refused to explain.

Then two of our brothers disappeared, becoming Condemned. I resolve then and there that I will only trade what belongs to me only. No more bringing anyone else into this.

Devere swims silently next to me as we draw closer to Maire's home. Selfishly, I am glad he is with me, that I do not have to face this alone. We always adventure together. I know his curiosity would get the better of him if he did not come along. And his desire to keep me from making one too many stupid decisions.

We make it out of the city and head toward the darkest part of the sea. Familiarity creeps up on us as we get closer to the dead plants and skeletons just outside of the mass of black so large that a pod of dolphins could get lost in it. And yet… something feels different. I can sense the presences from outside of the cavern, as many as before, even if they are faint.

“Are you certain?” Devere asks quietly and slightly strained, as if asking takes a lot of effort. “You do not know what Maire will require of you.”

No, but we can be certain that it will not be pleasant. Still, I see Sabine lying there on the beach, barely alive, and my heart stutters. “Yes,” I answer with assurance.

Devere pauses before speaking again. “Promise me you will not agree to anything until you have thought about it. Once you strike a deal with her, you will have to see it through. She is not one for leaving loopholes.”

I eye the pendant around his neck, the symbol for death. Such a bold statement for Maire to make him wear when she only wanted him to bring me back to her at the right timing. Fear skitters through me at the idea that perhaps there is more to it.

His words repeat in my mind again and again the closer we get to the cavern.

If I risked a storm for Sabine, I can risk a sea witch.

Although another storm sounds more appealing.

The blackness of the cavern is enough to inhibit our vision to a point. We see enough to make our way through the narrow, winding tunnel without bumping the walls. Icy tendrils snake up my spine; I press forward.

Paranoia will not help.

The tunnel narrows, forcing us to swim one in front of the other, before it opens up into a wide cavern. Pieces of a sunken ship lie scattered about, dark shadows cast upon them by the small bobbing orbs of light. The biggest piece is in the center of the room, with long chains floating up, holding a body in place by its ankles. Dozens of Condemned circle the body, snapping their jaws and clawing at it but not quite touching.

“Enough. We have guests,” says the body, which is not a corpse like I thought it was. “Come closer,” she beckons, her voice somehow fine despite missing a chunk of her throat.

I greatly consider fleeing.

“Do you not care for the sight?” She hums, and suddenly everything is bathed in light. Beautiful merfolk pine for her while she stares at us, her radiance nearly blinding. “Come closer. I have been awaiting your return.”

Why was I afraid before? Why did I want to leave? Of course I want to stay.

Devere and I obey willingly but respectfully keep a bit of distance between us and Maire. She smiles in amusement.

“You did well,” she says to Devere, then looks at me. For a moment her eyes are cloudy, her skin greenish grey, but the light obscures her again. “You require my help once more, and I will be happy to oblige… for a price.”

“I want to fix this,” I say, the words feeling like they are being pulled from my mouth, and lift my arm to show her as though something is compelling me to.

Maire reaches out and takes my wrist. I do not know when we drew even closer to her. Her touch is cool but gentle as she examines the bracelet. “You did take it off of her,” she muses as if confirming something she already suspected. “Sabine is full of grief and heartache, but also determination unmatched by any I have seen… except possibly out of you.”

Her name sounds wrong, the syllables dripping off the sea witch’s lips. Condemned hover nearby, and an icy chill permeates through me, stealing any warmth I had before.

“You merfolk believe you are the superior species to humans, but you form strong emotional attachments much more quickly than humans do.” She traces a pattern with a fingertip that has only half a nailbed left, the rest broken. I try to pull away, but her grip is iron. “Some might consider that a weakness.” She hisses the last part of the word as she meets my gaze with a wistful look. “I wonder… what would you be willing to give up for her happiness? Is there a limit?”

With a hum, everything is back to light and peaceful, and I stop trying to escape. Even when something grazes my back, I stay relaxed, unbothered. “Can you mend it?”

“It is possible. Most of it will depend on you.”

“Me?”

Maire chuckles. “Your people have lost so much knowledge of your own ways since The Fall. What I made for your beloved princess is no mere trinket, princeling. By giving this to her, you thought you were giving her luck and a chance at finding her dreams, but you also changed her fate and wove yourself into it.” She tilts her head. “You were wise to come to me before this broke. Your beloved still has a chance.”

“What do you mean?”

She taps the fraying part. “When you left her life, she began to lose hope in her dreams little bit by little bit. Her grandmother passed on her love of merfolk, and Princess Sabine is consumed by it, by dreams of you. This bracelet amplified those desires and set her fate.”

I try to swallow the lump forming in my throat. I did this to her, just a foolish child wanting to share my heritage with a girl eager to know as much of my world as she can. And wanting to keep her as mine forever.

“What do you say, princeling? Do you wish to see what memories and dreams this bracelet stores?” She guides my fingers and holds them in place. Colors unfurl in my mind, mixing and pulling apart until they take form: a younger version of me singing to Sabine; our first kiss, when she asked me to do it because she could not stand the idea of any of the boys at court bragging that they were the first to kiss her; the bracelet she made for me to match mine, only to have my parents confiscate and destroy it days later.

It is strange, seeing myself through her eyes, the way she remembers things. The memories are tinged in bittersweet feelings that morph into hope as new scenes I do not recognize take their place. These are not as

clear and branch off, showing multiple ideas. In one, Sabine wears the garb of the Ambassador as her grandmother did; in another, she takes the throne and mends the alliance with the merfolk; in the last, she hurries to the water to meet with a dark-haired merman. *Me,* I realize. She has no idea what I look like now, can only conjure a hazy idea of younger me. She remembers enough to have my specific color pattern on the scales of my tail.

The sea witch releases me; I inhale sharply. I am back in the darkness of the cavern, Sabine's bright dreams fading away. But then Maire's aura wraps around me comfortingly as she leans forward.

"What do you say, Prince Caspian?"

"What is your price?" I ask, steeling myself for the answer.

Maire shakes her head. "Do you know what it will take to fix it? That would be a better question to ask first."

"…What will it take?"

She taps her chin. "To fix this, you will have to help her achieve at least one of her dreams, preferably more if possible. Unfortunately, you cannot leave the water for long, and she has to spend most of her time on land…" When I do not say anything, she sighs. "Come now, are you not following? The easiest of the dreams to achieve is being together—you have already confessed your love for one another, and surely time has not changed those feelings, especially not with the dream bracelet constantly reminding her. But to do that, one of you would have to change to be with the other."

I ponder her words, trying hard to understand so I do not disappoint her. "You would… make me a human?"

"You are following." She grins.

"No," Devere interrupts, abruptly reminding me that he is here. "You will not be able to return home ever again."

"It will not be permanent," Maire says, batting a hand in his direction, "unless he succeeds in fulfilling one of her dreams before time runs out."

"Time?"

She turns her attention back to me. “My spells can only hold for so long, princeling.” As if to prove her point, the light slips for a second, revealing the body and Condemned.

“How… how long will I have?”

“One week.”

I stare at her in disbelief. “One week is so little time.” Finding a way to be together, given the fragile-at-best state between the merfolk and humans, would take a lot longer than a week.

“Magic has limitations.” She raises her brows in annoyance. “It should be easy for you to get her to fall for you again, given your history.”

“The risk is too great,” Devere interjects again. “The price for turning him into a human must be high.”

“Not as high as you would think… What is too high when it comes to saving the one you love?”

My throat bobs. “Name your price.”

“Caspian!” my brother hisses.

“Your voice,” Maire answers.

“My… my voice?”

A dreamy look softens her features. “I heard your voice in the memories, how beautifully you sing. That is my price.”

“Caspian, do not take the deal.”

But I still have plenty of questions. “How will she fall for me if I cannot communicate with her? Will she recognize me as a human?”

She leans closer to me as she drags a jagged nail along my jawline. Her lips are a mere breath from mine when she says, “Any woman would be tripping over themselves to get even a smile from you. Use what you have, princeling.” Her nail trails down my neck, my chest. Piercing chill follows its path.

“Caspian!”

“Will you return my voice if I succeed?” I ask, ignoring my brother’s pleas. We are too far to stop now. Even with Maire’s light fading in and out, I cannot bring myself to leave until I have a solution for Sabine.

The sea witch takes a moment to ponder. “If you retrieve something for me in the human palace… then I will return your voice to you regardless of whether you succeed or not.”

“What is it?”

She *tsks* and wags a bony finger. “If you accept my offer, then you will know it when you see it.”

“…And what happens if I fail?”

“You become a merman once more, and you belong to me. Strong magic requires strong payment.”

“This is ridiculous.” Devere swims toward us; the Condemned snap at him. “Caspian, you cannot be considering this… Please, reconsider. Perhaps there is another, safer way to help Sabine.”

“Perhaps,” the sea witch concedes, “but she has little time left before this bracelet breaks and her soul drains until she dies and your dear brother Caspian turns into seafoam long before his time.”

I see my own internal war reflected in Devere’s expression. If I had known everything about the dream bracelet beforehand, would I have ever given it to Sabine?

“It is your choice, but I would choose quickly. You are losing what precious little time you have.”

I pry my gaze away from him to the sea witch. “You have a deal.”

“Caspian!”

Gone completely are the light and peacefulness, replaced by darkness and cold and fear. The Condemned quicken around us, circling with such speed that keeps Devere from reaching us as the sea witch begins to speak in a foreign tongue. The floating orbs flicker erratically; her fingers emit black tendrils of magic. They snake toward my face. I want to swim away,

but I find myself unable to move. They shove their way into my neck and yank. I wince and clutch my throat, but the flash of pain dissipates almost instantly. The flesh is undamaged, no evidence of what I just gave up.

The sea witch still speaks in another language as she runs her hands down my body. The chill seeps into me, then heats up drastically. I barely hear my brother's cries over the sea witch's chanting. A stabbing sensation travels all over me. I open my mouth in silent screams—everything is on fire, everything is breaking and reforming.

"Almost done," the sea witch croons, hands cupping my face. "Do not forget our deal." She releases me; the pain lessens everywhere except my lungs, which are screaming for air.

"I would be quick," she suggests, closes my hand over the bracelet, and touches my chest. My lungs fill with air, but how long will that last me?

The Condemned slow almost to a halt, permitting Devere to come to me. I kick, but there is no tail, only legs that do little in the way of speed. Devere grabs my arm and hurries me out of the cavern. Everything is too dark for me to make out more than shadowy impressions.

"Quit trying to help." Devere adjusts his hold on me. "Let me bring you to the surface."

I can imagine how I am slowing us down, but I cannot help the panic moving my limbs involuntarily. Devere tightens his grip. The water surrounds me with a heavy pressure, and I close my eyes and try to focus on not breathing in. How can the sea, something I have lived in my entire life, seem so foreign and dangerous and *vast*?

My chest spasms. I keep my mouth shut, but water rushes into my nose, burning on the way down. Coughing, choking, convulsing. Devere does not let go, does not slow down.

We break the surface with a mighty spray. I sputter and spew water while my brother carefully carries me toward the shore. We are farther away than I thought, so by the time we reach it, I can breathe. Devere stops

when the water is hip height, and I step onto my feet for the first time. My legs tremble and knock together as I figure out how to balance. It is strange, looking down and seeing a human form. Mermen bodies are much neater, having certain parts tucked away until they are needed. Why everything is out in the open is beyond me.

Humans cover themselves, I remind myself. *I'll have to find clothes.*

I am that much closer to Sabine, that much closer to saving her… and myself.

I turn to Devere to thank him for all of his help, but no sound comes out. We stare at one another. In this form, with these eyes, I see how humans must see merfolk. There is an otherworldliness about Devere, like he does not belong to these surroundings.

His eyes glisten. "I did not want you to take the deal… but I understand why you did."

I can do nothing more than offer him a sad smile.

"Be careful. I will return to this spot every sunrise to check on you."

I nod. My fingers graze my bare wrist—

Dread knots my stomach. The sea witch had the bracelet and put it in my hand before sending us away.

But I no longer have it.

I search the water, splashing in my frenzy. Devere catches my arm.

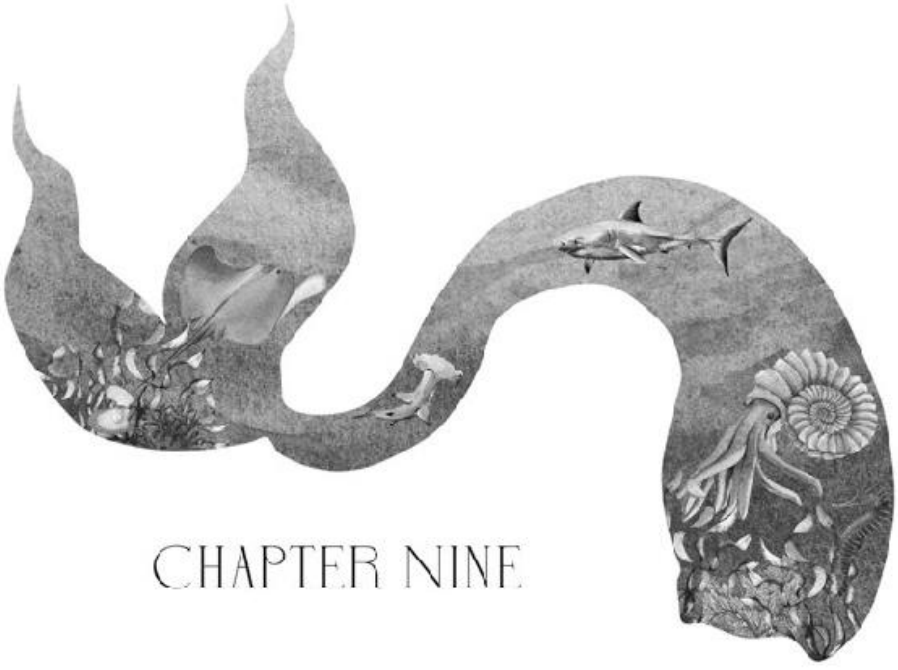
"What is it?"

I point to my wrist; his eyes widen. We look to where we swam from. The sun is high in the sky, so I can see well, but I can no longer breathe underwater and have no idea how to swim like this.

"I will find it," Devere promises. "Stay here. If I do not return before the sun sets, go to the human palace."

I shake my head. If Sabine does not recognize me, the dream bracelet may be the only way to show her who I am. Why would they take in a naked stranger who cannot speak?

Devere frowns, unsure which part I am shaking my head to. “Just stay. I will return shortly.”



CHAPTER NINE

SABINE

I carry a bundle of Oliver's clothes under my arm as I sneak away from the palace. The sun is high in the sky—it's much later than I wanted it to be. I groan and dig my heels into my mare's flanks. Normally I'd go on foot, but I am running out of time. With the suitors coming, who knows when I'll find an opportunity to sneak out next?

I pull the reins and barely wait for Blackie to stop before I dismount, run into the cave, and begin changing. I manage to get off the wretched dress when I notice a dark-haired man standing in the water.

A string of profanities leaves my mouth as I yank my other clothes on to cover myself. "I-I didn't know anyone was here. I'm so sorry, I don't usually see anyone."

The man just smiles, amused. There is a light to his blue eyes that seems to sparkle.

"Umm…" My entire body blushes. "I'm sorry, I would go elsewhere, but… this is where I… swim." I don't recognize him, but there is something oddly familiar…His pale coloring makes me think he isn't from around here, and I'm not about to have someone from another country thinking I'm crazy talking about merfolk. I've had enough comments about being the "merfolk lover" from other royals.

He steps aside, giving me room in the water to leave the cave. I can think of a dozen different ways this could go wrong, with him stealing my horse being the best of the options, and him doing things to me being the worst. I suddenly wish I had a weapon with me, even a small knife or a slingshot. A rock will have to suffice…

And why is he at my cave? I suddenly want him as far away from here as I possibly can, before his presence taints the sanctity of the memories the

cave carries.

He cocks his head, a mixture of pensiveness and sadness lining his eyes and furrowing his dark brows.

“What is your name?” I ask, deciding to be at least somewhat civil. Waves crash onto shore and flood the cave pool, water splashing onto the rock floor and my feet. I want to blame the shiver running down my spine on the chill of the water instead of the intensity of his stare.

Do I know you from somewhere?

He mouths something that I can’t make out.

“Can you not speak?”

The man taps his throat and shakes his head, face scrunched in distress.

“Are you from here?”

Another shake of the head. This time he points toward the water.

“Another country?” Most ships dock on the other side of the inlet where there is more room and a port city. I see no evidence of a shipwreck, unless this man was extremely lucky in surviving the storm from the other day and just now made it here.

No, not another country. He points again at the water and then makes a swimming motion. When I frown, he offers his hand.

“No offense, but I don’t know you, I don’t want to take your hand.”

He nods and shrugs in resignation. Runs a hand through his long, silky black hair. Looks around like there’s something that could help him.

What could help? I wonder. How would I try to explain myself without words? I can understand his frustration… The lack of ideas is enough to make me want to kick the sand.

Abruptly, he perks up and beckons me before disappearing under the water.

How bizarre…

I have no idea what to make of him. But it is already afternoon, and if I want to call the merfolk, now is my chance.

I pick up a stone for protection and follow him under. The water cools my burning cheeks. *I can't believe I undressed in front of a stranger…*

I push aside the second wave of embarrassment creeping up on me and look for the stranger. To my surprise, he is behind the magic instrument, waiting for me. He gestures to himself, then the instrument, then the distance behind him.

I'm as confused as ever, but I reach for the rods. He waves his hands frantically and points at himself again.

But you're human… Or did the merfolk do something to you?

He snatches the rods before I can. I grab at them, but he keeps them away, still shaking his head.

Is that the only thing you know how to do? I want to yell at him. It's unfair, but he's keeping Mormor's rods from me, and all I can think is how I can wrestle them away from him before we run out of air.

Carefully, he sets the rods down and lifts his hands, motioning toward the surface. He obviously can't hold his breath as long as I can. I could take the rods, but I don't want a fight if I can avoid one.

I resurface and whirl around. The man stays at the hip-deep water, no closer.

"I need to use that instrument," I explain.

He taps his chest and makes a swimming motion. Moves his arm behind him like a… a tail.

"Yes, the merfolk," I say, caught between relieved that he knows about them and exasperated that this is taking so long. "I'm trying to Call them. That's why I need the instrument."

He makes the motions again, practically stabbing his chest with his finger in emphasis.

"You're not one of the merfolk," I tell him. "You're human. I know what they look like."

He sighs and nods, hitting his chest vigorously.

“No, you’re not!”

He rolls his eyes and nods again. I’m sure if he could talk, he would’ve said his own string of profanities by now. Although we wouldn’t be in this situation if he could.

He tries again.

“Doing the same motions over and over isn’t going to help me understand!”

His shoulders slump; guilt washes over me.

“…I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped.”

His eyes flick back up to mine. He offers a half-hearted smile that takes the edge off my frustration, which annoys me.

I could tell him, try to explain. He obviously understands me, and while I don’t trust him, maybe he will understand that I have a plight of my own to deal with.

But before I can try, a horn blasts, signaling the arrival of suitors.

“Well, it’s too late to call the merfolk now.” Lamenting my loss of opportunity, I wring out my clothes and walk toward Blackie. “Are you coming out of the water? You can’t stay here.” I look around. Nothing seems out of place. “Where are your things?”

Why do I keep asking him questions when he can’t answer me?

He shakes his head and opens his empty hands.

“You don’t have anything? Did your ship wreck?” Another no. Eventually, getting rid of all the noes will reveal the yeses, right? He looks so helpless and frustrated that I feel for him. Just a bit. “Do you have a place to stay? No? Well, I guess we’ll have to find you one then. Come along.”

I can imagine what Mor will say if she finds out about this, how I, a princess, was out alone with a strange man.

A naked man.

I flush and turn my back to him as he steps out of the water. “You don’t have clothes?! Oh, never mind. Turn around.” I risk a quick peek over my shoulder to make sure he is following orders before I change back into the dress and toss the shirt and pants at him. “You can wear those.”

I wait, listening to the rustle of clothes. They were tailored for me and surely will not fit him, but some clothes are better than none.

Mor may be irate, but I can’t leave him alone with nothing and no one to help him. I’ll find a place to take him then head home before anyone realizes I’m gone.

I hear a thump behind me and look instinctively before spinning away again. Still naked… fumbling to get his legs in the pants… I clear my throat and try to joke, “First day on your new legs?” but it comes out strained. And honestly isn’t that funny. It’s something our father says when we return home from sailing and still have our sea legs. Really, it’s the first thing I can latch onto so I don’t think about what I just saw accidentally for the second time.

Does that mean it’s no longer an accident? I try not to think too hard about that.

When dressing takes longer than it should, I dare to peek again. “No, that’s the head hole. Here.” I go to him, glad that he at least figured out the pants… sort of. They’re backward, but I’m not going to help him fix it.

Now that the more… *intimate* parts are covered, I take pity on him and help with the shirt. “Stop fighting me. Just… here, move your arm here, and then… there you go.” I help him fix the shirt, tug it down to hide his abs before I can start blushing again.

Then our gazes lock. I feel like I can drown in the blue of his eyes, held captive by his long, dark lashes. He stays still, studying my face as I study his. There is something to it that tugs at my mind, begging me to remember some sort of similarity…

Hope lights his features. He tilts his head slightly like he’s waiting for me to figure out what he’s been trying to tell me, that it should be obvious now that we’re this close. But I’m distracted by the shape of his mouth, the —

Blackie nickers, shattering the moment. I yank my hands away from his shirt hem and almost trip as I go to her.

“Come on,” I tell him. “Let’s find you a place to stay.”

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

CASPIAN

"Sing for me." Sabine knelt beside the pool in the middle of the cave so that she was eye-level with me.

"No." It was the same conversation we had had nearly every day since we went to the shipwreck with Captain Bill a couple weeks ago… when we narrowly escaped the Condemned. I had no idea why she suddenly was so intent on hearing me sing, especially after the warnings her grandmother had given her. And the Condemned… I was forever grateful that they had only shrieked, not begun to sing. That would have put me in a scenario of trying to save Sabine from not only them, but also herself. Because while normal merfolk could control the urge to draw humans into the depths, the Condemned had no qualms about it.

"Sing for me!"

"NO." I splashed Sabine, and her fake pout was broken by a grin.

"That's cold!" She reached in and splashed me back.

"It does not feel cold to me." I flicked my tail, splashing her again, and enjoyed the way her eyes glimmered with mischief.

"You have done it now, Caspian, Prince of the Kingdom Below." She grabbed my arm and pulled me toward her, and I did little to resist.

"So I have." I studied the way her lashes frame her eyes, the freckles that peppered her nose and cheeks, and the shape of her mouth. Before I could give into my impulses, I implored her, "Give me one last request before you dole out my just punishment."

Sabine's brow raised in suspicion, as it well should. "You dare beg for your life?"

"I could," I told her, dragging my gaze slowly back up to hers. Pink colored her cheeks; I knew she felt the same stirrings I did, but she would

not give up her quest to hear me sing so easily. “But there is something else my heart craves.”

Her cheeks darkened; her lips parted slightly. When she finally spoke, her voice lowered, dripping with anticipation. “What would that be?”

I let her wait a few moments longer and could practically see her imagination run wild. It was wicked, I know, but I leaned in slightly, watched her lashes flutter. “Speak my name.”

That request brought her to look away from my mouth, back to my eyes. “Your name?” Her brow furrowed. She had not moved, and we were mere inches apart, her breath warm on my lips.

“The way you say my name captures my heart and ignites my soul,” I whispered. “Speak it, and I am yours.”

Her eyes danced back and forth between mine; the pulse in her neck raced.

“Caspian,” she breathed, like my name gave her life. And then we kissed, neither able to hold back any longer.

I touched her jawline with my fingertips, then traveled down her elegant neck, tracing symbols of my people that promise happiness, love, devotion. She shivered and leaned into it, her fingers winding into my hair as if she wanted to keep me here forever.

And I would have gladly let her.

She pulled back, and when I tried to follow, she tightened her grip on my hair slightly, a teasing grin on her lips.

“Sing for me,” she asked once more. “Sing for me… Caspian.” Her other hand touched my chest, and I was sure she could feel my racing heartbeat. She did not speak it, but I knew what she was thinking: she wanted to accept and know everything I was, just as I did for her.

But this was a dangerous part of me. Even as she suggested it, I felt the invisible tug that made me consider giving in. It was different than being careful of grazing her skin with my claws or making sure she returned to

the surface for air. This was a desire I had been taught to ignore for the sake of keeping the peace between merfolk and humans.

“It is too dangerous,” I said softly.

Her grip eased, and the light in her eyes dimmed. “Are you frightened?”

“Yes.” No hesitation.

“You would never hurt me.”

The slight tremor in her voice had me frowning. “Never intentionally. But it is in our nature to sing, to draw humans to the depths.”

The furrow in her brow deepened. “What if… what if you sang just a few notes? Captain Bill said the merfolk song is still the most beautiful thing he’s ever heard.”

Little did she know that I had eavesdropped on some of their conversations, and he had warned her about merfolk nature on more than one occasion. I could not imagine that being the whole truth of what he said.

“Sabine…”

“Caspian.” The hand in my hair joined the one at my chest. Her hands were thin and warm, and they left a tingling feeling wherever they touched. “I trust you.” Then, using her fingertip, she traced a symbol on my skin: *One who is my heart.*

I searched her eyes for any flicker of doubt but found none. Guilt instantly welled within me, making me realize I had not explained the gravity of that symbol’s meaning. “That is a strong declaration, Sabine. We use it once, for someone we cannot be without. Mates often die within days of each other because we cannot bear separation.”

She stilled. Somehow her eyes seemed deeper than the seas, and I would not have been able to look away even if I had wished it. Tentatively, she reached behind her and undid her braid. I watched, not sure what to make of her actions until she took my wrist and wrapped her hair tie around it—but it was not a hair tie at all: it was a bracelet, fashioned to resemble

the one she wore. After she secured it, Sabine held my hands and whispered, “I mean it, Caspian. I never want to be parted from you.”

A bittersweet feeling filled my chest and made it ache. “Even if we come from two different worlds?”

Sabine offered a small smile. “What wouldn’t we do to be together?”

Unable to find words that matched the strength of my emotions, I kissed her tenderly. She trusted me. So why could I not trust myself? If she was the one who is my heart, how could I deny her anything?

I finally resigned. “Sit against the wall and stay there.”

Sabine gave me another quick kiss before scrambling to follow orders, then watched me, curiosity lighting her face more than the lone torch that hung on the wall.

Silently, I prayed to Njǫror, the god of the seas, that I would be able to control this power. Then I sang.

From the first note, Sabine’s muscles relaxed and her grin grew wider. Magic thrummed through me and washed throughout the cave like a mighty tempest. Strong, beautiful, captivating. It was like part of me was getting to stretch after being contained for so long.

I had intended to sing one verse and stop, but the song begged to continue to the end, to not leave it incomplete. Sabine had scooted closer, eyes never leaving me. So I continued.

The song rose and flowed, making my very soul hum with vitality. Words slipped from my tongue one after another, each more beautiful than the last.

Sabine crawled closer to the water’s edge. I moved back as she stepped in as if the cold no longer affected her in the least. No trembling… only walking toward me, eyes locked on mine. Her thin dress billowed and swayed in the water, leaving little to the imagination when it lifted to expose her legs.

“Caspian,” she whispered, sending delicious shivers through me.

Part of me wanted to stop singing and give in to other desires, but the song tugged me along like a parent leading their child.

I swam backward and watched in glee as she followed, the water rising to her breasts, then her neck.

“Caspian…”

Beautiful as the song was, there was something… off. The sound was not quite right. Then it hit me: it is meant to be heard underwater.

Sabine continued to follow as I went to deeper waters, closer to the entrance, where the sea awaited us. Yes, I was singing the song of the sea, so it must be heard in its depths to appreciate it in all its glory.

When we made it outside of the cave, Sabine said my name again before her head finally slipped under the water. Her hair floated about her face, the strands turning golden in the sunlight that leaked through from the surface. Her green eyes were locked on me, never blinking. My heart twisted: Sabine was beauty, the very definition of it. And she was in my world, embracing it all.

In the back of my mind, it occurred to me that she could not hold her breath underwater for long—

I have to finish the song.

Just a little longer, I wanted to hold onto this piece of my soul and stare at her beauty in my domain, where no one would interrupt us.

I could have taken her to the Kingdom Below, just as I had always wanted. She would follow my song wherever I went, and when it ended, I could start it again. And again. And again. She was *mine*, mine forever, and I would keep her—

She opened her mouth, but instead of my name, she choked and convulsed. Still, she drew closer, hands reaching for me.

I tripped over my words at the sight, but the song begged, *Keep singing. Finish it.*

But there was another voice that had been repeating to the beat of my heart since I first heard it: *Caspian, Caspian, Caspian.*

Bubbles escaped her mouth in a flurry; her body jerked, her hair and dress mimicking the motions more slowly, like an echo, as they writhed around her.

CaspianCaspianCaspianCASPIAN

I ceased the song immediately. Horror seized my heart.

CASPIANCASPIANCASPIAN

With speed I rarely showed her, I grabbed Sabine and shot to the surface. She coughed and hacked, expelling water, and clung to me like her life depended on it. Which it did, I thought grimly as a gnawing feeling took over my chest. I ignored it and swam back to the cave, a strange mixture of relief and disappointment that Sabine's grandmother was not there waiting for us.

Sabine's coughing lessened, and her grip on me loosened as she looked up at me, confused. "Caspian? What happened?" She took in the surroundings and the way I held her against me protectively.

My heart beat painfully at my name from her lips, which were tinted blue and oh, so chapped. Her skin was too pale, and she trembled, probably from both the cold and fear.

"I sang," I said, my voice almost as strained as hers, and embraced her tighter. She said nothing, just rested her head against my chest, and we entered the cave once more. I helped her up onto the stone floor even though I knew she could do it herself—her movements were still shaky, just like I felt on the inside.

Her hair was stuck to her face and neck, and her corset and dress clung to her body's shape. Water dripped off of her to make a puddle on the stone floor. She searched my face. "Caspian…"

I kept to the edge of the water, my fingers pressing into the stone. I did not deserve to hear her say my name.

She reached out to me, but I swam backward, just out of reach. Hurt twisted her expression.

“Caspian… please, don’t do this…” Her voice was raw, her green eyes bright with brimming tears.

I tried futilely to ease the lump in my throat by swallowing. “I almost drowned you, Sabine.” The words were like sand in my mouth, but I forced them out anyway. “Part of me *wanted* to do it… Still does.”

The confession hung between us, heavy.

Tears joined the puddle on the floor. I wanted to look away, but I could not bring myself to. *I should leave—*

Sabine moved to the edge and reached for me again. “Come here.”

As much as I wanted to give in, I shook my head.

“Caspian.” She cleared her throat and winced. When she spoke again, her voice was more sure, but no less full of emotion. “Caspian, you fought against your nature *for me*. You didn’t hurt me. But if you leave now, you *will*.”

A myriad of feelings raged within me, and I could not bring myself to speak or move.

“Please,” she begged, then took a painful breath that shuddered through her. More tears slipped. “Please stay. Don’t shut me out. I want to know you—all of you, just as you are.” Sabine bit her lower lip and swallowed slowly. “Caspian, I… I love you.”

Then I could not move for a whole other reason: the words—ones I had heard her speak only when reading from her favorite stories—repeated and tumbled through my mind. *IloveyouIloveyouIloveyou*

Carefully, Sabine lowered herself into the water. One step, two steps, three… She stopped in front of me and tilted her head back to look up at me.

“I love you,” she repeated softly, and put a hand over my racing heart. Her touch was warmer than it was just minutes ago. There was fear in her

eyes, but it was fear of me leaving, of me rejecting her…

She was not afraid of me… even when I was afraid of myself.

One who is my heart. Sabine had declared herself to me in the ways of both her people and mine…

I could not tell if it was my heart or hers I heard pounding. Perhaps both, trying to tug us toward each other in desperation. But I could still hear the song calling me, begging me to finish it.

The small bit of warmth she regained was slipping away, being stolen by the sea, just as greedy as my people. As I was…

Before I could suggest she leave the water, Sabine stood on her tiptoes, closing the gap between us, and pressed her lips to mine. Soft, gentle, imploring…

One who is my heart.

I yielded. Her hands explored my chest, skimming over flesh and patches of scales like she was trying to commit the feel of me to memory. Every brush of her lips eased the ache in my heart…

I pulled her against me and deepened the kiss. The pull of the song faded, quickly replaced by Sabine flooding my senses.

IloveyouIloveyouIloveyou

She wrapped her arms around me, hands dancing down my back…

Sabine hissed and drew back. Blood welled at her fingertips, and she looked up at me sheepishly. “I forgot about the spines on your dorsal fin. Oh, don’t give me that look. It wasn’t your fault.”

She was lucky mine were not poisonous like some merfolk’s are. I had nothing to say in response that she would not argue with, so I gently took her hand into the water. Magic shimmered and wrapped around her individual fingers, concentrating on the pads of her fingertips. She watched in fascination as the small punctures closed over as if they never happened in the first place.

The magic dissipated when finished. Sabine wiggled her fingers in front of her face, inspecting them closely. Then she looked at me, a question in her eyes.

“Merfolk can mix water and magic to heal,” I explained. “Our magic has a wide range of things it can do… although my father says we lost a lot of knowledge in The Fall.” Sabine shivered, so I suggested, “Let us get you out of the water before you freeze. Your grandmother will never let me hear the end of it if you become ill.”

She let me help her back onto the cave floor, then she stopped and turned toward me again.

“I have to go.” Sabine did nothing to hide her disappointment at the sun starting to slip into the horizon. “My parents will be expecting me for dinner.” She looked at me hopefully. “Will I see you here tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

She began to stand, but I caught her wrist, the one with the dream bracelet. It pulsed beneath my fingers as if it recognized me.

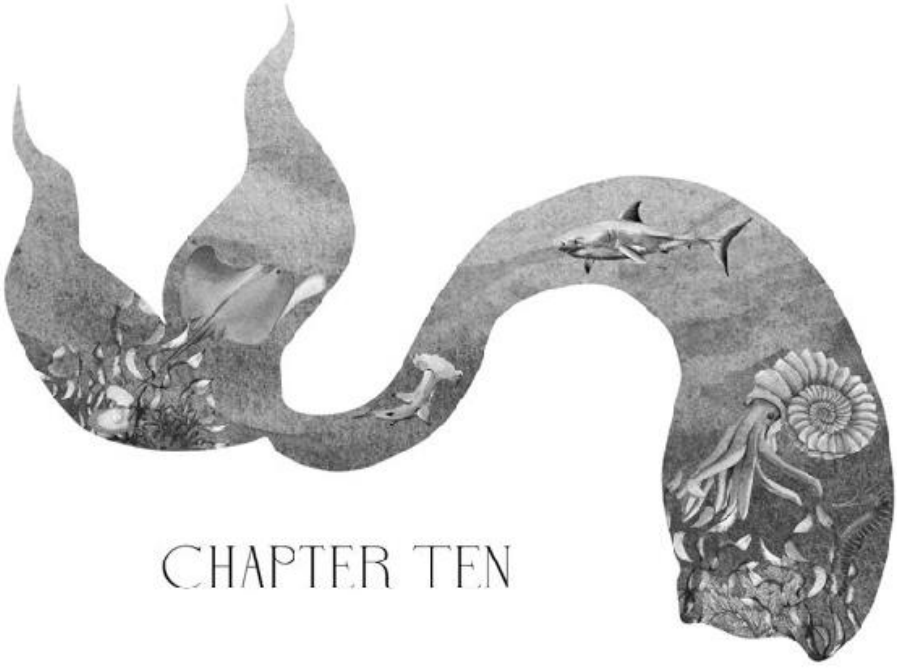
Her gaze pinned me to the spot while I finally gathered the courage to say, “I love you, Sabine.”

Her grin returned. “I love you too, Caspian.” She ran her thumb across my bottom lip. “All of you. There is no need to hide any part of who you are.”

“Everything I am is all yours,” I promised, and kissed her again.

Knowing someone would be sent to find her, Sabine forced herself to leave, and I had to let her.

After her footsteps were too far to hear, joy filled the silence that remained. Every nerve in my body was alive, even more than when singing the song of the sea.



CHAPTER TEN

CASPIAN

The clothes are incredibly uncomfortable, especially the pants. Sabine mounts the horse, and when I walk up to her, Blackie nickers again and bumps my arm. I smile and pet her. Everything is so… dry. As a merman, my hands always glided over everything, being naturally slick. But as a human, there is a lot more friction.

And everything is so heavy. Just moving my arm to pet Blackie requires so much effort, not to mention standing on my legs.

"Odd…" Sabine looks between the two of us. "She doesn't usually warm up to strangers that quickly."

Except I am no stranger. I cannot help but smile and hope that Sabine starts to put the pieces together. She is clever, and if I cannot find a way to get her to understand, Devere will find the bracelet soon enough.

He will.

I did not realize how much I had done by giving Sabine that dream bracelet. The fact that both of our lives hang in the balance…

I will not let anything happen to either of us.

I can see the answer teasing Sabine's mind as she studies me. I must look quite different as a human if she has not been able to figure it out yet. But she will.

Sabine has to help me get on Blackie, and when I struggle to balance, she pulls my arms around her waist.

"Hold onto me, but no funny business."

I smirk. This is the Sabine I remember. I have no desire to have her hit me or shove me off Blackie, so I steer my thoughts toward my surroundings. It is strange how clearly I can see in the sunlight as long as I

do not look directly into it. My merfolk eyes are meant to see in the dark depths, but these human eyes welcome the light, rely on it.

Blackie needs no direction from Sabine, trots toward the main city on a dirt path carved into the sandy hills that turn into flatter lands with bits of green here and there.

“Almost there,” Sabine assures me. “Maybe we can find someone to help us communicate. Or figure something out after a good night’s sleep.”

I fight the urge to sigh and realize just how much my body aches, how my eyelids are growing heavy. When I tighten my grip to wake myself, Sabine only tenses slightly. I resist the urge to embrace her.

I am a merman. Nothing has ever been out of reach for me… except her. And she has always felt like the one thing that should be nearer, closer to me than the water against my skin. And yet I cannot get to her—at least not yet.

Patience. It is only the first day.

But after five years of waiting to see her, being this close without her knowing who I am…

Patience.

We arrive at the gates. Men in armor stand tall and look up at us, eyeing me warily.

“State your business h—” one starts, but the other cuts him off, saying, “Princess Sabine! Please, forgive us for mistaking you for someone common. Open the gates!”

“Thank you,” she says as we pass them, and I doubt they catch the slight tremor in her voice. They are too busy bowing and speaking blessings upon their princess.

Are you frightened? I wonder. The closest I have seen her to frightened is the day the Condemned attacked. With her hair up in a braid, the scars are more obvious, wrapping around the sides of her neck. They make me wish I

could kill the Condemned again. Or that I could have gotten to her before it happened.

“Let us escort you back to the palace,” says the guard who first recognized her.

“No need,” Sabine insists. “Your duties here are more important.”

“Nonsense, Your Highness.” He whistles and gestures, and another guard takes his place as he mounts his own horse. “Hello, sir. May I inquire your name?”

He stares at me with a furrowed brow, and I want to curse Maire for taking my voice from me. I hoped Sabine would somehow recognize me or that I would come up with some way to communicate. And now I have more people trying to speak with me. Wonderful.

“He cannot speak,” Sabine answers for me and urges Blackie forward. “I believe he survived a shipwreck.”

“Was he alone?” He asks as we make our way through the plethora of tightly packed buildings that leave little room for narrow, winding streets that are already crowded with people going about their day. “I will suggest a search party be sent out immediately. We will find any potential survivors. Perhaps one of them will be able to tell us who he is.” His gaze drops to where my arms are around Sabine’s waist.

I could shake my head and try to mouth the words, but I doubt I will be any more successful than before, and I have no new tactics to try. Besides, I am curious to hear what Sabine’s theories are.

“Perhaps.” The word sounds like an automatic reply. Then she looks at the guard and smiles. “I would appreciate that greatly, Captain Reginald, as I am sure this man would as well. We can find our way while you do that.”

“Nonsense, Your Highness.” Captain Reginald shakes his head. “I will not shirk my duty by leaving you unchaperoned and unprotected. The search party can wait.”

“I know the inns and the way to the palace, Captain.”

He frowns. “Pardon me, Princess, it was not my intent to insinuate anything of the kind. Although, if I may be so bold, all inns are full due to the arrival of suitors and their entourages. Many have traveled far to see which of them you will pick.”

I reflexively tighten my grip on her, and Sabine flicks my arm, the one out of sight from the captain.

“We cannot leave this man stranded, especially when he cannot speak.”

The captain offers a mirthless smile. “Come, Your Highness. I am certain the king and queen will offer their hospitality to this stranger, and we guards will seek out any other survivors. You have no reason to worry.”

He guides us through the streets, and many curious people look to see who is passing them with the captain and princess, surely full of questions like the ones Sabine has. They do seem eager, awaiting what will happen after Sabine meets her suitors.

What if she does fall for someone else?

Use what you have, princeling.

This close to Sabine, I want to bury my face in her neck and breathe her in, to hold her close and run my fingers through her hair like she used to let me…

The palace comes into view, surprisingly close to the other, regular buildings, like everything was purposefully packed in tight. It does not shine like the one in the Kingdom Below, but it has its own majesty, standing tall and proud with its stonework and beautiful stained-glass windows. I would have to get a closer look, but it seems like the glass is merfolk craftsmanship, able to withstand even the strongest of waves.

The horses walk up the steps without hesitation but stop at the entryway. Dismounting immediately, the captain approaches and offers his hand to Sabine while eyeing me yet another time.

I release her, flexing my fingers so I do not reach for her again. She slides off Blackie easily, making it seem odd that she took the captain’s

hand to begin with. Then she looks at me.

Carefully, I swing my leg over and end up slipping down faster than I am ready for. My hands and knees collide with the stone floor and instantly smart.

Water is so much easier to maneuver. And who thought legs were a good idea? Although they are proving to be much more useful than a tail in the World Above.

Sabine helps me to my feet; the captain frowns.

“Thank you for the escort,” Sabine says with a smile that seems like a mask. “We can take it from here.”

“I’ll bring your horse to the stable then, Princess,” the captain says in way of salutation as Sabine and I walk into the palace. The guards let us in immediately when they recognize her, and watch me. I wish for my magic back, to be able to feel the essence of them and to share part of mine to show I have no ill intent.

This may be harder than I anticipated. That fear is only emphasized when a man and woman hurry toward us, a small crowd just steps behind them. The king and queen, I realize, and when I think about how we look, still wet and sandy, me being a complete stranger in their eyes, I can understand their sour expressions. Those are the same ones they used to give whenever Sabine spent too much time with me… which was often enough in their opinion.

“I am glad you are safe,” King Robert says as he hugs his daughter. Then he turns his attention to me. “Who might you be?”

“Yes, who are you?” Queen Josefine demands.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SABINE

"He cannot speak," I answer for him when I see his petrified expression. "I think he was shipwrecked during the storm and washed up onto the beach."

Mor studies him thoroughly. I know we look ridiculous, surrounded by paintings in gilded frames and sculptures standing tall and proud as they line the hallway, my family all here in their finery and even the servants looking in better shape than we are.

"All the inns are full, so I thought he could stay here and we could find out who he is." Father has let me go, so I dare to take a step closer to the stranger as if in his defense, but it's really to draw Mor's ire away from him.

Her expression shifts suddenly into a grin. "No need. I know who he is."

The stranger's eyes widen, and for some odd reason, panic knots my stomach.

"Why, you are the final suitor to arrive, Prince Lucas. I would recognize that wavy dark hair anywhere—just like your mother's. It was always unruly for her as well."

I go cold. No wonder he seemed so familiar. Lucas. *Lucas.* As in the leader of the boys who tried to get my first kiss, the one I gave a black eye to, and then my mother made *me* apologize. I fight the urge to put distance between us. As Duchess Amelia said, we had been children then, and people can mature… hopefully…

He is acting very differently than when I last knew him.

Mor relaxes her shoulders. "Your mother and I were best friends before we transitioned into married life." Then she frowns and tilts her head

slightly, but not enough to make her diamond-filled crown slide even a touch out of place. “Although Alma never mentioned your inability to speak.”

The stranger—Lucas—smiles and nods along while Mor talks, but the movements are too stiff. When she mentions his lack of speech, he tenses, his brow furrowing.

“I believe that might have happened in the wreck,” I say. “He seems a little disoriented and unbalanced.”

“We shall bring you to your room and have a healer inspect you posthaste,” Father promises. “Were there any other survivors?”

“The guards are looking as we speak,” I answer.

“Excellent,” Mor says. “Sabine, how about you freshen up so we can dine together? All of the other suitors are already in the dining hall awaiting your arrival.” Her smile turns tense, so I quickly agree and let the servants lead me away. I am sure to hear an earful or two later, but right now, I’ll take the opportunity to dull her anger before that time comes.

I bathe, and while the servants dress me and style my hair, I mull over Lucas and his predicament. He has no injuries, not even a scratch, from what I saw. I have no idea what could make someone lose their voice other than that, but he seems to know about merfolk and has some sort of connection to them… A curse, perhaps? But they lost their higher magic in The Fall. None of this makes sense, and I’m dying to know the answer. Maybe it has to do with why the merfolk aren’t answering The Call.

The moment the servants are done with me, I almost leap out of the chair in front of my vanity. I have somewhat of an idea where Lucas’s room is, and I feel the need to reach him before he goes to the dining hall and we can’t speak privately.

Luckily for me, he is just making it to the top of the steps when I find him. He halts, eyes taking me in. I’m sure I look like an entirely new person, my green ball gown spotless and tight across the bust to accentuate

my womanly figure, my hair tied up and decorated with strings of pearls. And, of course, the velvet choker around my neck to cover the scars.

The new, royal clothes suit him, but my eyes jump up to his before I can think of what I'd seen earlier and blush. His long hair is tied back with a ribbon the same black as his hair and clothes. Even if all the servants could find to fit him was funeral attire, he is so breathtaking that I nearly forget what I want to ask him.

He smiles, making something warm bloom in my chest.

No. This is Lucas, remember? I clear my throat. Not princess-like, but necessary to keep my mind on task. "I hope everything is to your liking, Prince Lucas."

He nods even as his smile slips a bit. Odd.

I take a tentative step closer, and his eyes follow me. "I am going to help you find your voice again," I promise him, unsure why I am, just that I feel like it is important. Because there, in his eyes, is something begging for me to figure this out and make sense of it all.

I have an idea, but there is no time now unless I want to risk angering my mother further. "I'll try to bring you something so you can write later," I say. "Maybe that'll help us figure this out." I could have had him write in the sand earlier… but the thought had not occurred to me until a few minutes ago. I blame being flustered.

He frowns, but it's quickly replaced by a look of hope that makes me wish we didn't have to go to dinner. I stuff my curiosity down and take his arm.

"I will try to find time after dinner," I tell him as I adjust his arm so he is properly escorting me to the dining hall. He tucks his arm—and with it, my hand—closer to him, and the simple gesture makes my heart skip a beat. I focus on not tripping down the stairs, ignoring the fluttering in my stomach mixed with a feeling of guilt. The only person I have ever cared for—*do* care for—is Caspian.

Maybe that's why this stranger makes me feel this way, I think. *He's what I imagine Caspian would look like if he were human.* And, as handsome as the stranger is, I still prefer Caspian as merfolk, his otherworldly beauty that makes me believe there is so much more to explore in this world.

For the thousandth time, I wonder who rescued me from drowning. If only I'd been able to open my eyes, to see if somehow I'd had enough luck for my savior to be Caspian.

But maybe it was for the best, because I hold that hope close to my heart, not wanting it to be shattered.

Lucas still struggles with walking gracefully, his free hand clutching the banister, and I have to wonder if he really is connected to the merfolk. Unless he hit his head in a shipwreck, but I doubt the healers would have allowed him to leave the room if they thought he was that injured.

Lucas catches me staring, and I break eye contact instantly.

"Take your time," I encourage him.

Eventually, we make it to the bottom, and he places his free hand over mine. It is a bit too familiar, so I pull away.

When we arrive in the dining room, all eyes focus on us. I move away from Lucas as everyone stands out of respect for me. So many men, so many different looks, their sole purpose here to win my hand.

I put on a smile. "Thank you all for coming. I hope I did not make you wait long." By the dishes covering the table, I assume we did, but no one dares to point that out. We all take our seats, me toward the end where my family is, and Lucas in the only empty seat amongst the guests. We dine, and I glance over at Lucas every once in a while, amused at how he watches the others and mimics them.

It's almost like he is in a whole new world. It seems highly likely that the merfolk did something to him. Did they somehow get their higher magic back? Maybe his ship wrecked near their kingdom, and in retaliation for

what terrible things we humans did to them, they took his voice and made him relearn almost everything about being a human.

At least it looks like they didn’t take his memory.

“Sabine, are you listening?” Father asks.

I realize everyone is waiting for me to answer a question I missed. Bashfully, I bow my head. “Forgive me, Far. I let my hunger distract my mind.”

He stares at me for a beat longer as if deciding whether or not to believe me, smile on his face faltering. “Forgive her,” he addresses the suitors, “she is still recovering from nearly drowning during the storm.”

I wonder if he actually believes that. Mor’s pleasant expression is a little too stiff to make me think she does.

One of the suitors stands and lifts his silver goblet, drawing our attention. With his bright smile, I can see where he might have his pick of women for a wife. Even the scar on his cheekbone somehow adds to his appeal. “Princess Sabine, I believe I speak for everyone here when we say we are grateful to Njǫror for sparing your life. May the gods and goddesses continue to protect you and give you a blessed life.”

Many express their agreement and drink, Far and Mor included. I dip my head in thanks and smother a giggle as Lucas almost spills on himself. A few suitors notice, but no one makes a comment.

After that, the meal drags on, but I force myself to focus when Far introduces each of the suitors and talks about their countries. I greet them in turn and smile.

Because that is the life of a princess.

One I never asked for.

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

SABINE

It took all of my willpower to return to the palace instead of staying with Caspian. Blackie, my horse, waited outside of the cave, and even she seemed loathe to leave.

He loves me…

I touched my lips, which still tingled from his kisses.

He loves me…

At the gate, I was stopped abruptly by not two guards, but four, double the normal amount. And I recognized none of them. On any other day, I might have been frustrated, but I was still swimming in the sea of giddiness I had yet to find a bottom to. Blackie nickered and tossed her head as if she were annoyed on my behalf.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"We have orders to close the gates before sunset," answered one of the guards. There was barely a hint of pale scruff at his jawline, and his grip on the rifle—which he was starting to point my direction—was wrong. The others had yet to follow suit, just as much doubt in their eyes as he did. If I could dismount before they gathered courage, disarming the first guard would be a matter of a few simple moves. I doubted he had it in him to pull the trigger.

But why was he pointing a gun at me in the first place?

A steel-clad calm iced over the surface of my giddiness like a protective layer. "What happens to people who do not return in time?"

They eyed me. I imagined I looked a bit strange, my dress still soaked, my hair in disarray, and my shoes and stockings removed, in my saddlebag. If they were observant, they would notice the finely-crafted saddle stamped with the royal crest.

If a gun were not pointed at me, I would have found them not knowing my identity almost refreshing.

“How do we know you are not Condemned?”

A remembrance of that eerie chill snaked down my spine and stole the last of my joy. “Condemned are creatures that used to be merfolk, and are therefore bound to the sea.” I knew my father and mother did not care to promote teaching merfolk culture, but this was something basic everyone should have known if they wanted to survive.

Instead of seeing reason, the first guard lifted his gun so it was pointed at my chest, and this time the others copied. Blackie’s ears flattened.

“They can shapeshift,” he said with a slight tremor in his voice, “come onto land, and—”

“STAND DOWN.”

The guards jolted and scrambled to obey as Captain Reginald appeared in the guard tower above us.

“Open the gates immediately.”

Captain Reginald met me on the other side of the gates, and I could feel the other guards’ eyes still on me. “Princess Sabine, you have my sincerest apologies. With the new orders in place, we haven’t the time to properly train the new recruits before they are thrust into duty. They are so eager to obey that it clouds their common sense.”

I couldn’t help glancing over my shoulder to see their dropped jaws and wide eyes.

“Please, allow me the honor of escorting you back to the palace, Your Highness,” Captain Reginald offered with a bow.

I was about to come up with a dismissal when Mormor arrived on horseback.

“Thank you, Captain,” she said, “but I will escort my granddaughter myself.”

Captain Reginald turned and bowed again. “Of course, Ambassador.” Then he set to doling out orders to his men.

From the glint in her eyes, I knew she was waiting until we were out of earshot of the guards to speak. But I was not prepared for the sharp edge to her tone.

“He used his Song on you.”

I blinked in surprise. “How—”

She reached over and tugged Blackie’s reins gently, pulling us closer together so we rode side-by-side. Most people were already indoors, their shutters closed and doors locked. With the quickly fading light, our only illumination was the lantern Mormor carried. Made of pale blue glass from the sea, it bore symbols of the merfolk that meant protection and guidance, and so the candlelight inside cast shadows of those symbols around us.

“I can feel it,” she answered softly, her grip on the reins tight still. “It dances over your skin, trying to find a place to latch onto. But the magic of the dream bracelet is more powerful. Do not remove it.” Her hand moved from the reins to the woven bracelet, and she ran her thumb over it. A single black strand glittered where she touched, just for a moment, and then returned to its normal color.

“What is a dream bracelet, Mormor? Caspian tried to explain it to me, but it sounded like he didn’t quite know either.”

We rode in silence until we passed most of the buildings and were on the path that led directly to the palace. With grand walls on either side, it looked as though the palace had its arms outstretched to hug our kingdom.

“There are many things we lost in The Fall,” Mormor said quietly. “The merfolk are not the only ones who suffer, but their loss is greater than ours. From what little I know of your dream bracelet, it is very powerful magic, magic that was lost in The Fall. Do you know where Caspian got it?”

“He made it.”

She frowned. “Not likely.”

“Why would he lie to me?”

Mormor took her time responding. “I am not saying he is lying, child. It is just highly improbable that one of the merfolk would have that amount of power after The Fall.”

“…Where else would he have gotten it?”

“I do not know,” was all she said, but I could see the theories swirling in her mind.

Our horses easily ascended the stairs of the grand entrance, where Far and Mor awaited us.

Mormor suddenly squeezed my wrist. “Do not speak of the Song.” She released me and straightened just as we made it to the top. Servants hurried to assist us in dismounting and taking care of the horses.

Mor glanced down at my feet. “Did you lose your shoes in the water? Or leave them in the cave?” I started to answer her, but she cut me off. “Never mind that. Mother, thank you for retrieving Sabine. I will have the servants—”

“Actually, Josefine,” Mormor said, “I would like to speak with Sabine and help her freshen up for dinner.”

The two shared a look I couldn’t quite read, but after a few moments, Mor relented. “We shall await your arrival.”

Mormor hurried me along before my mother could change her mind. “We will have to disguise the magic,” she whispered in my ear. “Your mother may not care to practice understanding magic, but she still knows how it feels.”

Mormor brought me to her room near the back of the palace. Filled with tomes and merfolk treasures, this was always my favorite place in the palace. Other than the library and training grounds, that is. The merfolk royalty loved to gift Mormor with their art and copies of their texts, usually carved into shells and precious stones, sometimes in the bones of fish.

I wished my room resembled hers.

Mormor opened her closet. Half was filled with dresses for me for occasions such as these…

“Put this on. Blue is Josefine’s favorite.”

The fabric tried to stick to my skin as I changed into the one Mormor suggested. She knew Mor better than anyone else.

“Keep that bracelet on no matter what. I know your mother suspects something between you and Caspian, but if she found out he used the Song on you…” She clucked her tongue and walked toward the vanity, returning with a perfume.

I coughed and fanned at my face. “That is *strong*.”

“Strong enough to alter the feel of it. She will be too distracted. If she thinks you are smitten with him… she may push to find you a match sooner.”

I wrinkled my nose and finished tying off the stays of my dress. A small price to pay so I could keep seeing Caspian. My heart fluttered at the thought of him, and the glee unthawed once more.

Mormor shook her head, a hint of a smile at her lips. She ushered me to sit at the vanity so she could fix my hair. “I know about the love growing between you and the merfolk prince. It was bound to happen sooner or later.”

I found myself playing with the dream bracelet, following the patterns with my fingertips and admiring how similar they were to the ones on Caspian’s scales.

“What possessed him to use his Song? Did you ask him?”

My eyes shot to hers in the mirror. “How do you always know everything?”

“Because that is my job as Ambassador of the Sea.” She twisted my hair and secured it with a pearl comb to match the dangling pearl earrings and necklace. “I know you two want to know everything about one another, but

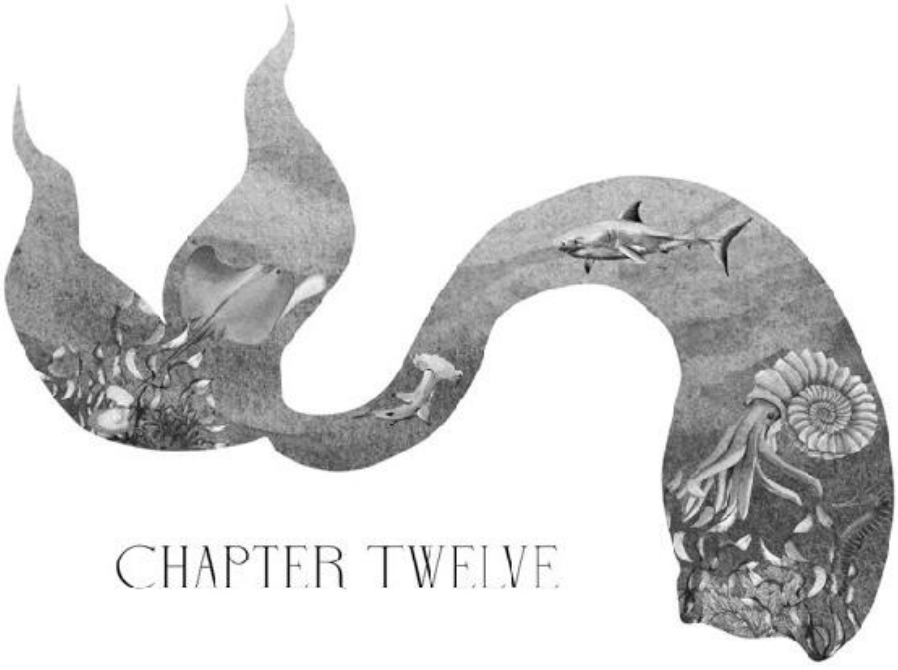
there are limits. Do not ask him to do that again." Her tone had softened, but the words hurt nonetheless.

"I do not think he will let me ask him again," I assured her, my gaze on the bracelet. "It terrified him."

Mormor paused. "That is… good, to keep both of you safe… Were you not terrified?"

As hard as I tried, all I could remember from earlier were flickers of images, emotions, and sounds. Any negative feelings came from after, the ache in my chest and throat, the fear of seeing Caspian so horrified. "I… No." I swallowed hard and made myself look up at her. "I trusted Caspian, and still do."

Slowly, Mormor pulled me to my feet and looked me over, making small adjustments I didn't think were necessary. Then she pulled my sleeve over the bracelet and looked up at me with her green eyes, same as mine. "Do not let him use the Song on you again," she said quietly, and led me to dinner.



CHAPTER TWELVE

CASPIAN

After fumbling through the meal, I stay toward the back of the room the king and queen brought us to, full of chairs and couches and tables with sea-inspired decorations. Even the legs of the furniture have seashells and merfolk carved into them, as if, even though they refuse to ally with us, they cannot bring themselves to let us go completely.

The rest of the suitors eye each other as they take turns speaking with Sabine… although sometimes they speak over each other or, by accident, her. They encourage her to sit on the couch, and two immediately sit on either side, garnering glares from the others.

And as the conversations go on, covering the crackling of the fireplace, Sabine's eyes keep drifting to mine.

Then she looks away quickly as she is drawn back into socializing. The way the suitors hover around her, vying for her attention, reminds me of sharks circling their prey. Not that we merfolk have a much better process: my brothers have shown off in front of plenty of mermaids, singing while dancing, letting their tails brush—

Please see me, I silently beg Sabine. *I am out of my element here, and I have no idea how to reach you. I need you to see me, to see who I really am.*

Then show her who you really are.

I try not to shiver as Maire's voice slithers into my head, cold and slimy, making me feel like I am being plunged back into the cavern with her. Mindspeak, a magic technique lost after The Fall, but apparently not as lost as we thought. *How?*

Come now, I am sure you are smarter than this, princeling.

I bristle at her smugness, how this all seems to be an amusing game to her. *She thinks I am a human.*

You are. At least, at the moment. Make her fall in love with you. She is already eyeing you more than the others.

I can feel her presence not only in my mind, but also my eyes. No pain, despite it being uncomfortable. I blink to test if I am still in control… and find that I am. *But to fix the dream bracelet, she needs to know she is falling in love with* me.

Does she?

In reality, I am not sure, but magic tends to be very specific…

If you are so certain you will not be able to get her to understand, then find my artifact, and I will return your voice.

Where is it?

If I knew where it was in the palace, I would not need you.

I suppose that is a fair point, although I do not know how exactly her magic works, how much it differs from ours. I should count myself lucky that she needs me.

Sunset tomorrow ends the first day. You may have a week, but I believe you want your precious princess in your arms sooner than that. If you feel a magic pull, follow it. Once you have the artifact, bring it to the sea, and I will take care of the rest.

Her presence leaves slowly, but the chill lingers. This time, I do not suppress the shiver.

“You could move closer to the fireplace,” suggests one of the suitors nearby, one I had not noticed. His voice is gentle, matching his features. “Although if you do, I suggest skirting around, else they may take it as a challenge.” He tips his glass in the direction of the suitors surrounding Sabine.

I shove down the instinct to whisk her away. Not that I could in this body… at least not yet. After all the times she complained about the boys at court, how she asked me to kiss her before any of them could boast that they did—

Now those boys are men.

“You are quite quiet,” the gentle suitor with the kind brown eyes says. “Is it true that you do not have a voice?”

When I look at him, I do not need my missing merfolk magic to sense his intentions: he is curious, merely making a friend to ease the awkwardness of the situation and perhaps pass the time. So, I nod.

“I am sorry to hear that. I will say, it seems the princess has taken a liking to you regardless.” He sidesteps closer to me and says in a hushed voice, “The others were coming up with all sorts of wild ideas about you. But do not worry, they are merely jealous that you already have had time with Princess Sabine before they could… and that she keeps looking at you.” There is a slight smirk he tries to cover by taking a sip of his drink. “These poor bastards think showing off will impress her.”

The smirk is infectious, making me smile a bit.

“My name is Aksel,” he introduces himself. “Stick with me, and… well, they will probably tease you like they do to me anyway, but I would appreciate at least one friend.” He extends a hand, and it takes me a moment to realize he wants me to shake it. His grip is firm, like he is certain he made a good decision, and it reminds me of when Sabine and Oliver first taught me that human interaction. That time had been to seal our friendships too, a promise that we would be there for one another no matter the circumstance.

“She said your name is Lucas,” Aksel continues, drawing me out of my memories. “I must confess, I believe we met as children. My family visited your kingdom, and when my eldest brother was being a bully, you stood up for me.”

I put on a small smile as he goes on, talking about the real Prince Lucas and his kind nature. Guilt gnaws at my gut, but there is nothing I can do to correct him anyway, so I pay my penance by listening to him.

Where is Prince Lucas? I did not expect a response from Maire, so I am not surprised when she does not answer. If she even has something to do with it, that is. What if he returns? What will they do with me then?

The doors open, and the king and queen return. Hush settles over the room.

“Gentlemen,” King Robert announces, “that will be all for now. I thank you again for coming. Tomorrow, my daughter will have time with each of you, and the day after, we shall have her birthday ball. Hopefully by then, one of you will have swept her off her feet.”

A ball. I think back to all the things Sabine and I discussed as children. She mentioned balls… They were… Oh no…

I am going to have to dance.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SABINE

My cheeks hurt from keeping that smile on my face, and my jaw hurts from gritting my teeth when my father announced that the ball is in two days.

Two. Days.

As if I will be able to forget Caspian and hand my heart over to any of these men.

After lunch and so much talking in the parlor, everyone parted ways, and I slipped back into the library, where I now sit, flipping through a handful of texts I procured from the history section.

I half pay attention to the pages I leaf through, catching bits here and there about merfolk. All of the texts I actually need that Mormor didn't hide for me were destroyed the day the relationship between merfolk and humans soured. But I hope to find something helpful anyway.

Did he not understand me? Before everyone dispersed, I told Lucas to meet me in the library in an hour. His face lit up, and he squeezed my hand.

But he was at least half an hour late.

Give him some more time. Oliver would tell me that most people aren't as adept as sneaking around as I am. Still, I gave Lucas a note with directions to the library…

That thought pattern halts as I flip the page. The earlier pages of this book are much more worn than the latter ones, which still have room to be filled in. What catches my attention is the drawing: a sketch, two bodies overlapping, one a merman, the other a human man.

The merfolk have many magical abilities, one of which being the ability to transform their lower half into that of a human the

moment they step onto land, and back again when they touch the sea.

I read the sentence again. And again. But… that's not right. Caspian tried following me out of the water plenty of times, and he never changed—he would have if he had the option. Mormor used to mention stories of The Fall, how merfolk lost a lot… The only thing is, no one knows *what* exactly they lost. She said it happened before her grandmother was born, and yet, lots of the stories passed down have gaping holes in them, like a book with missing pages.

But then I remember the Condemned, the way they transformed to scale the side of the ship…

I chew on the inside of my cheek as I ponder this new information. If the merfolk had whatever was lost returned to them, Caspian and I could see one another… if we figure out how to get our people to be on decent terms.

I jump when Lucas comes into view suddenly. He smiles sheepishly, my note in hand.

"You startled me," I say, then pat the chair beside me. "Please, sit. I brought paper and ink."

He slowly sits. Stares at the paper, inkwell, and quill in front of him. Looks at me.

I blush. "I… I thought that since you have no voice, and your motions don't make any sense to me, this might help."

It seems unreal how blue his eyes are. They remind me of the depths of the sea, and tempt me to dive in just the same.

CASPIAN

It took me far too long to find the library. I wandered until I found it, nearly caught by multiple guards. If Sabine had given me the note all those years ago when she was teaching me to read and write her language, I might have been able to figure it out. Now, the letters look like random lines to me.

I look at her and hope she can see who I am. Maire is adamant that I can use my looks to get Sabine to fall in love with me, but I do not think the sea witch understands Sabine.

She stares at me, and I have to wonder if she is starting to piece things together. The emotion in her eyes is so similar to how she used to look at me, and my heart beats harder, almost painful. Her green eyes search mine with such intensity it is hard to breathe.

Please see me.

A furrow forms in her brow, and she clears her throat, looking at the paper in front of me. To her, I am Lucas, not Caspian. Of all the people for her to think I am…

I try to keep the gut-twisting disappointment from my face as I pick up the quill. It feels odd between my fingers, having not used it in many years. And now, without the webbing between my fingers to help keep it in place, I fumble with it.

“Like this.” Sabine reaches over to adjust my grip, her touch light and gentle. Meanwhile, I sneak another peek at her, and I cannot help but smile at the way she still bites her lower lip while concentrating. She catches me and quickly pulls away, putting space between us.

“What happened to you?” she asks, her voice even quieter than before.

This time I stare at the blank paper, willing myself to remember what Marina and Sabine taught me so long ago. They had written my name for me, told me the names of the letters… But now it is all a blur. I press the

quill to paper in hopes it will come to me, but nothing happens except the ink welling and making a spot.

“Do you know how to write?”

There is no judgment in her tone, but my face flushes all the same. If only I can make her understand, if only she could read my language—

But she does. Or at least used to.

With renewed vigor, I start to draw… and then stop abruptly.

Tsk, tsk… I told you to use your charms, princeling. No cheating. Maire’s cool tendrils caress my mind, sending shivers down my body.

“Are you cold?” Sabine looks at me with a mixture of concern and confusion. “Does your head hurt? We can try this again later if you want.”

Even though she does not say it, I can hear the disappointment in her voice. I shake my head and try to think of a way around Maire’s ridiculous blockades, because if I follow what she is suggesting, I will end up with a black eye, especially because of who Sabine thinks I am.

Sabine abruptly checks out the window. The sun is going to set within the hour, already casting a myriad of oranges and reds atop the surface of the sea and bleeding into the sky. She snaps her attention back to me. “I have another idea, but we’ll have to leave now.” She pauses, swallows. “If you’re up for it, that is. We will have to sneak out.”

I am surprised that she is willing to help me this much. Granted, she knows I am connected to the merfolk somehow, so perhaps she thinks that in figuring out why my voice is missing, she will find out why the merfolk have yet to answer The Call.

At my nod, she says, “Stay here. I’ll return soon.”

So I wait. And wait. A few library attendants eye me but say nothing. I pretend to read, and then try futilely to write again. No such luck.

As promised, Sabine returns at last, this time wearing a long cloak that hides what she is wearing. The clasp and fabric cover the worst of her

scarring. “Care for an evening stroll?” she asks, loudly enough for the library attendants to hear.

“Might I suggest you make it a short one,” says a woman at the large desk covered in piles of books. Ink stains her hands as she writes in a blank tome, every so often glancing at another open one. “It is nearly sundown, Your Highness, and although the monsters have yet to make it past the walls, you can never be too careful.” Her eyes float up to Sabine’s for a moment, and she offers a soft smile.

Sabine’s hand lifts toward her neck before she jerks it away. “Of course. Thank you for the reminder, Mina.”

The woman bows her head, and we take our leave. Sabine’s pace is fast, but I am starting to get used to walking, and my long strides have me keeping up well enough. That is, until we reach the stairs. I stifle a sigh and grip the banister as we descend. Sabine turns around near the bottom, then hurries back up to offer me her arm. I take the excuse to have her close, to touch her, and the ache in my chest eases the smallest bit. But longing wells up so quickly that I stumble, banging my elbow on the banister. Sabine tightens her hold and helps right me again.

“Are you well?” She asks, looking up at me. The height difference between us is strange, given that before it always depended on what part of my tail I rested upon, and I always chose to keep us as close as possible. Now, I tower over her, no choice in the matter. It makes her seem smaller than before, but no less fierce.

I have to wonder if my head will suddenly fall off after all of the nodding and shaking I have to do to communicate.

Assured that I am fine, Sabine helps me to the bottom and lets go immediately. When she fixes her cloak, I notice that she is wearing pants and a shirt again. Whatever she has in mind, she wants to have maneuverability. I really hope she is not thinking of calling the merfolk again, especially not so close to sunset.

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

CASPIAN

Devere and I made it to the family meeting after everyone else. The throne room of the undersea palace was open, just like the rest, columns holding up the structure with enough space in between for most types of sea creatures to fit through easily, although most did not dare come unless invited.

Mother and Father were there, as were two of our brothers. Raed had been missing for a long time, and no one had a clue what happened to him. Then there were Hedeon and Ammiras, two mermen Devere insisted were our brothers, regardless of the fact that I had no recollection of them. And…

Where were they? Apparently we were not the last ones to arrive.

Uncharacteristically still, Mother pressed her lips into a thin line and looked at the floor, which was a mosaic of seashells and stones. Father put a hand on her back as he addressed us with his deep voice, “Another tragedy has struck: Hedeon and Ammiras are missing.”

Devere peeked at me out of the corner of his eye, concern tightening his features. Our other brothers went just as still as Mother, sinking until their tails rested against the floor like hers.

“I have sent out search parties,” Father continued, “but in the meantime, I expect you to stay here, where it is safe.”

“But Father,” Aakil, the eldest of our brothers, interrupted, “we wish to seek them out as well.” His tailfin twitched. “You cannot expect us to wait and do nothing.”

Tears slipped from Mother’s eyes and floated off her face to meld with the sea. Father wrapped his arm firmly around her shoulders.

“No, I expect you to console your mother and remain here where I know where you are. We have already lost—” He cleared his throat. “We

have already lost Raed. And while we still hold to hope that he will find his way back to us, we must focus our efforts on bringing Hedeon and Ammiras home and keeping the rest of you safe." His nearly black eyes found mine. "No one leaves."

I started to object, but Father dismissed us with a flick of his tail. My brothers bowed their heads and left for their rooms, Devere last among them after throwing me a warning look.

And yet, I stayed. Neither of my parents seemed surprised.

With a sigh, Father said, "Caspian, I know you wish to see your human friends, but if you could wait a few days until we find your brothers, that would make things easier on everyone."

"But you know where I go," I countered. "I am either with them or I am here."

"Or out being reckless with Devere." Father raised a dark brow.

"We would not be so foolish as to do that with our brothers missing."

"But you would risk leaving here to see humans?"

Mother looked up at Father and patted his hand. "You know the World Above is fascinating, Fiske. Just because the humans are starting to hate us does not mean we—"

"What do you mean?" I cut in. Guilt nipped at me, but I had to know, so I could not bring myself to regret asking.

Mother, with her dainty, delicate features and even more delicate voice, faced me and explained, "Our alliance with the Kingdom Above has been… fragile, at best. It seems the more humans advance in knowledge, the more they feel they do not need us."

"Some see us as nothing more than creatures that should exist only in myths," Father added, his jaw set.

"But we need each other to survive." I played with the bracelet around my wrist. "We thrive when we are together."

“That is true,” Mother agreed with a sad smile while Father snapped, “What is that?”

I held it against my chest. “It is just a bracelet.”

“Then why does it look like a dream bracelet?”

Mother asked, “How would he get a dream bracelet?”

At the same time I insisted, “Sabine made it for me! There is nothing magical about it.”

Father stormed toward me and snatched my arm before I could pull away.

“Fiske, please.” Mother moved toward him.

“This is serious, Ginevra,” Father snapped, making both of us wince. His voice sounded like the roll of thunder, which matched the storminess in his dark eyes. “Even if this does not have magic—”

“It does not!” I interrupted. At least mine did not… As for Sabine’s… well, he did not need to know about that. I could only imagine his response if he found out.

“—it still presents a problem.”

“Why? How in the seven seas is this a problem?” I struggled against his grip, but he did not budge.

“Caspian, watch your tone!” Mother chastised. “Fiske, you are hurting your son. There is no harm in him having a gift from the human princess.”

Father turned toward Mother, yanking me along with him. “You heard the human royalty: they do not trust us. If he keeps accepting gifts from the human princess and spending time with her, he is going to get his heart broken at best and get hurt or killed at worst!”

Tears lined Mother’s eyes. “We do not know that.”

“But we do!”

“You do not!” I whirled around so I was between my parents, catching my father’s full attention. “The Ambassador of the Sea, Captain Bill, Sabine, Oliver—they are all my friends. None of them would do anything

to hurt me.” I considered telling them about my love for Sabine, but we had agreed to keep it secret for the time being. A few knew, but Marina had warned us that such an admission would have consequences. In this state of mind, Father would not accept it in the least. “If you start treating them like the enemy, they will become the enemy. Show them that we still care, that we still want an alliance, that we are not the monsters they believe us to be.”

The gills on my father’s neck flared as his brows furrowed.

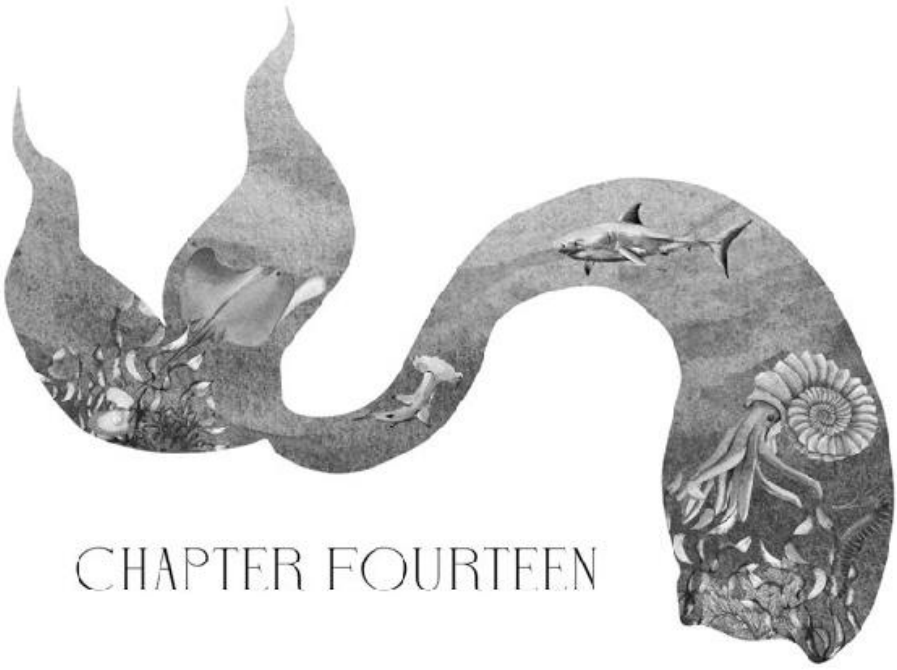
“Please,” I said, my voice softer than before.

Mother came up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. “I know we are all frightened for what the future may bring, but we cannot give in to despair.”

My heart pounded wildly for the few moments of silence. Then Father released me.

“Stay here for today,” he said. “Tomorrow I may let you visit the surface.”

I rubbed my aching wrist. Not ideal, but better than I feared would happen. Sabine would wonder, but I could explain later. “Thank you.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SABINE

To his credit, Lucas keeps his steps fairly quiet as he follows me. Especially given how unnaturally he walks, knees bending a little too much sometimes and other times not enough, weight shifting back and forth jerkily. I find it very odd the healers found nothing wrong with him. Perhaps I will have them inspect him again.

There is a room on the bottom floor of the palace that is far away from everything else, quarters that are meant for the Ambassador of the Sea. Mormor's room. Even after entering it as many times as I have since she died, grief squeezes my chest the moment I step inside. No one bothers to lock it because no one has need to go in: there is nothing left but a few pieces of furniture covered in thick layers of dust. Every merfolk artifact, every piece of clothing and jewelry she owned, every book and trinket—gone. Destroyed not long after she passed and my parents declared the end of our alliance with the merfolk. Mor will not even come near this wing of the palace, and guards rarely check this area for longer than a quick glance.

I shut the door behind us, avoiding looking at Lucas, and hurry to find the false wall in her closet. It comes away easily, and I motion for Lucas to go in. I'm surprised that he obeys so quickly, awkwardly bending a bit so his head doesn't hit the rough stone ceiling.

I'm helping *Lucas* of all people. But he does seem like an entirely different person… and everyone deserves a second chance, right? Not for romance, no, not even friendship, but perhaps civility at least. A tolerant understanding.

But I can tell he wants more than that by the way he looks at me, the way he accepts my help and my touches without a second thought. He is coming with me on this mini adventure without knowing anything about

what we're doing or where we're going, just because I asked him. Well, that and I told him I want to help him find out what happened to his voice. Still… there is tension between us, and I can tell he is holding back.

Keep holding back, or more than just your eye will hurt.

I replace the false wall as best I can before I catch up to Lucas, who is hunched over, slowly making his way through the narrow tunnel. It is dark, so I encourage him and give directions every so often, counting our steps to make sure we're still going the right way.

After what feels like an eternity, soft light peeks through the cracks in a wooden hatch in the ceiling. This part of the tunnel is slightly wider, but not by much. I maneuver my way around Lucas, stand on tiptoes, and knock on the hatch.

Nothing happens.

Surely he's here at this time of day…

I reach to knock again, but then footsteps tap across the floor and the lock clicks. Captain Bill opens the hatch and peers down.

"Well, hel—Oi, why ye be bringin' strangers here, lass?"

"I'll explain once you let us up."

"Just because he be handsome—"

"Let us up, Bill." I glare at him.

"Easy there, Goldie." He offers his tattooed, leathery hand and pulls me up easily. Although he grunts like it took more effort than it actually did.

Bill's room is one of the biggest ones in the inn, which isn't saying much, considering he picked the one closest to the gate, not the most luxurious. He is paid enough by the Crown to give his ideas on expanding our naval presence… although his favorite, and more secretive, part of his job is dealing with any and all pirates who enter our waters. Stealing from those who stole from him, with the freedom to enact retribution as he pleases as long as no one talks… There are plenty of stories he's told me, but far more he hasn't.

I scoot back so that the old pirate can help Lucas, but Lucas is already standing up straight, his head nearly as tall as the floorboard. He gets himself into the room without trouble. No voice and minimal control of his legs, but his arms and mind seem to be competent.

“Who be the stranger?” Bill asks, closing the hatch once more.

I take a few steps toward the desk to put space between me and Lucas, and lean against the edge. A few open maps with scribbles and a compass weighing them down, but other than that, the desk is fairly empty. From a quick glance, there are no new markings. I ignore the bite of disappointment.

“This is Lucas. Lucas, this—”

Wide-eyed, Bill interrupts, “*The* Lucas? As in the prince you pun—”

“Yes, one and the same,” I snap. “That was years ago. Can we focus on the matter at hand?”

“Manners, Goldie,” chastises the pirate. He removes his captain’s hat and bows with a flourish. “Captain Bill, short for Billgallo, not William. Never William. Also known as The Lucky Pirate, if ye be savvy ’bout pirates.”

Lucas smiles genuinely. It catches me so off-guard that my heartbeat falters for the briefest of moments. I smother my own smile, crossing my arms instead. The two of them shake hands like they are old acquaintances.

“Soft,” Bill muses. “These be prince’s hands, no doubt. No disrespect to ye.”

If Lucas is offended, he doesn’t show it. The smile turns into a smirk.

“Lost yer tongue, boy?”

“He cannot speak,” I answer on his behalf. “He was found alone on the beach near our cave.” Our cave, as in Caspian’s and mine. But I’m sure Lucas assumes I meant Bill’s and mine. I continue anyway, not bothering to clarify. “So far the only semi-solid theory the healers have is that he was

shipwrecked during the storm earlier this week and just today washed onto shore."

Bill lifts a scraggly brow. "Oh, and what be yer theory?"

I can feel Lucas's gaze on me, but I purposefully avoid it, focusing on Bill instead. "It has something to do with the merfolk. And before you start saying I'm deep-sea fishing with my bare hands, he's confirmed that I'm right."

The two of them inspect each other. I grimace, realizing I should have had Lucas change into different clothes. If we leave this room and anyone sees us, it'll be obvious he doesn't belong here.

"Merfolk did this to ye?"

Lucas sighs and makes an uncertain motion.

"Don't look like confirmation to me, lass."

I glower. "Lucas, have you had contact with the merfolk in any way recently?"

He nods and taps his chest. When Bill looks to me for an explanation, I shrug.

"I have yet to figure out what he means by that."

Bill runs a hand over his mostly grey beard, lingering over the beads and shells braided into it. "Marina might've been able to help ye." I flinch at the mention of Mormor, but he keeps going. "All I can tell ye is, unless they found a way to break the curse of The Fall, merfolk have little magic left, not enough to curse someone."

Emotions welling within me, I break eye contact and look about the room. Bare essentials, the only major thing in here that belongs to Bill is his treasure chest, which has three different kinds of locks. When I tried opening it, Bill told me affectionately but in all seriousness, "I love ye, Goldie, but if ye try that again, I'll leave ye in the middle o' the sea, let ye swim home."

Which is why I asked him to hide what was left of Mormor's belongings in there.

He follows my line of sight. "Ye need somethin'?"

I can only bring myself to nod.

"Well, turn 'round."

At his twirling gesture, Lucas and I turn our backs to him, briefly making eye contact. His gaze sends a bolt of energy through me, and I instantly cast my attention elsewhere: without thinking, I'd touched my wrist, which now bears nothing but a strip of white, stark against my tanned skin.

I'm so sorry, Caspian. I will try to find it… and you. Do not give up hope.

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

SABINE

Oliver rode his horse alongside me. Normally, I would've raced to the cave to make sure I was there the moment Caspian arrived, but Mormor's words stuck with me.

"Is something wrong?" Oliver cocked his head to the side. "You're awfully quiet for once." Then he chuckled and dodged when I swung at his arm half-heartedly. "Seriously, what's the matter?"

I avoided looking him directly in the eye. The sun was still low enough in the sky that we could not quite see the details of each other's faces. "Have you… Does the way Far and Mor talk about the merfolk sit right with you?"

Oliver instantly sobered and looked straight ahead. "I mean… There are lots of decisions they have to make, and a lot of them I disagree with. But I remind myself that I am supposed to be king someday… and that scares me. What if there are factors in their decisions that we don't see?"

I listened, then took ten seconds to ponder his words. "I don't think anything justifies considering ending the alliance with the merfolk."

Oliver jolted and almost slid off his horse. "Ending the alliance? When did they say that?"

Heat bloomed in my cheeks. "I… I may have eavesdropped…"

"Without me? The least you could've done was invite me along."

I felt guilty but smothered it with an apologetic smile. The truth was that I didn't want to have to explain to Oliver why I wanted to eavesdrop on our parents, and I certainly wasn't ready to explain everything going on between Caspian and myself. I was sure he had his suspicions, but I doubted he knew the extent of it.

"So they are considering ending the alliance?"

I exhaled slowly out of my nose. “They think we are sticking to the past by focusing on keeping our alliance with them instead of making the other alliances stronger. Other kingdoms don’t understand why we don’t leave the merfolk to the Condemned, since they are being overrun with them. They consider it a losing battle.” The words left a bitter taste on my tongue, and I looked up at the bright sky, wishing it would rain to wash it away.

Oliver was quiet for longer than made me comfortable, and that unease only grew when he studied me in the soft light of dawn. Despite that, I forced myself to meet his gaze.

“You love him.” He stated it as a fact, but there was an unspoken expectation of an answer hanging between us.

How could I explain? That seemed like such a simple way to put it, and yet it encompassed the heart of it all. “Yes.” I braced myself for warnings, for the questions, for him to bring up what Far and Mor would think.

Instead, a soft smile graced his mouth, and he leaned over to squeeze my wrist, the one bearing the dream bracelet. “We will not let the alliance fall apart.” There was such surety in his voice that my throat ached and all I could do was nod gratefully.

We said nothing else until we arrived at the cave and let our horses roam nearby. We knew they would not go far, especially with the treats hidden in Oliver’s bag, which he carried inside with us.

I scanned the cave, noting that everything was just as I’d left it the previous day. A day that Caspian had not come to see me and given no warning. That was not, of course, the first time it had happened, but it was rare enough that I felt justified in being concerned. He would show up today. He had to.

I started to reach for the spare clothes on the shelf when Oliver stopped me.

“I almost forgot.” He retrieved a bundle from his bag and handed it over. “I thought these might fit you better. Alma was kind enough to tailor

them.” Before I could thank him, he added with a wink, “Now maybe you’ll stop stealing my clothes and ruining them.” Then he hurried off, calling over his shoulder, “I’ll stall Captain Bill for a bit, but I can’t promise much!”

I chuckled and made a mental note to thank my handmaiden later. The new clothes fit perfectly, not too tight but not too loose.

Caspian arrived just as I finished changing, and I jumped into the water to meet him. With a grin, he kissed me before he took in my attire.

“Those suit you better.” His eyes lingered in certain places as they made their way back up to my face.

“Oliver and Alma,” I said as if that explained everything. It was suddenly a lot warmer in the cave.

Caspian looked down at our clasped hands, at the bracelets. “I am sorry to have left you waiting yesterday without explanation. Two more of my brothers are missing, and my father forbade us from leaving. I finally managed to convince him to let Devere and me go.”

“Your brothers are missing? Caspian, I’m so sorry.” I hugged him, but he seemed surprised by the gesture. And when he wrapped his arms around me, it felt possessive, not affectionate. “What’s wrong?”

I tried to pull back to look him in the eye, but he held fast. “My father believes that the alliance between our kingdoms will soon end.”

It was my turn to be possessive. He must have sensed the shift, because he turned his face into my hair and murmured, “Nothing will separate us, Sabine.”

My throat was too tight, my eyes stung, and I felt like the walls were closing in. So I clung to Caspian. “Losing the alliance between our kingdoms could,” I managed as tears spilled down my cheeks and dripped onto his shoulder.

“That will not happen.” Caspian ran his hand over my back in soothing circles. I leaned into his touches and lay my head in the crook of his neck,

breathing him in.

I wanted to believe him. So badly.

“Promise me that if it does, we’ll still find a way to be together,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion.

A gentle claw tucked hair behind my ear so he could trace my jawline. “It will not happen.”

“…But if it does?”

He was quiet for a moment, then brought my wrist up to eye level. The dream bracelet caught the light of the sunrise and shimmered. “If you wish to be with me, then we will find a way to be together, no matter what happens. Whatever you dream, you will have.”

I listened to the rhythm of his heartbeat as I pondered his words. There was a weight to them, something that tugged at my soul and urged me to speak. Slowly, I leaned back so I could look him in the eyes. There was a question in them, but that was a small current in the sea of love and hope.

“My dream is to be with you. Forever.”

No sooner had the words left my lips than the bracelet pulsed, sending something powerful throughout my body. We inhaled sharply.

“What was that?”

Caspian shook his head, stunned.

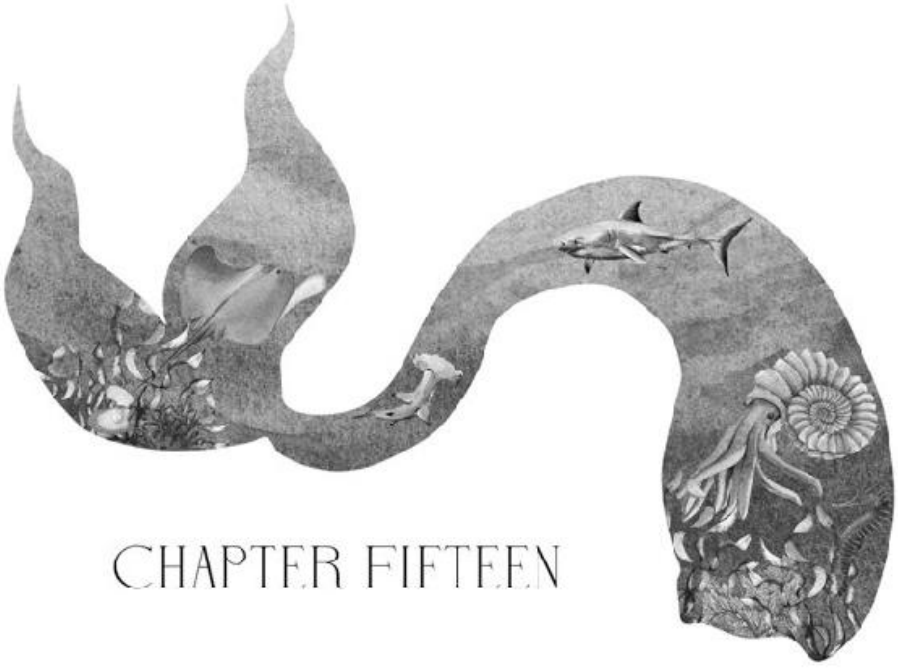
“You felt it too?”

He nodded.

Tentatively, I touched the bracelet. It was warm and felt like it was… alive. Certain. “This bracelet really is magic…”

“It is. Nothing will tear us apart,” Caspian promised, pulling me in for another kiss.

Mormor’s warning about the bracelet and magic slipped to the back of my mind. Because if this magical item was going to keep me with Caspian, I’d pay whatever price it asked in return.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CASPIAN

While Captain Bill works on undoing the locks on his treasure chest, Sabine and I stand with our backs to him, facing the wall. A couple of cracks run up it, barely touching the low ceiling. Yet the space feels roomy in comparison to the tunnel Sabine brought us through.

My eyes are drawn to hers, but she quickly looks away, instead focusing on the tan line on her wrist. She catches her bottom lip between her teeth, clueing me into the fact that she is deep in thought.

I had the bracelet. I can tell she is worried about finding it again, and I plan on returning to the beach as soon as possible, in hopes that Devere found it.

In the meantime, I still have no idea what Sabine has planned. If she wants to Call the merfolk again, I am not sure I will stop her this time. At first, I did not want my people to be drawn into this until I could be certain that things are better, but now I wonder if Devere had to tell them what happened or if they are out looking for me while he looks for the dream bracelet. Calling them might help if Devere told them what happened to me. But something tells me Maire would not let him.

After a number of odd noises that nearly tempt me to peek, Bill finally grunts and says, “This what ye lookin’ fer, Goldie?”

Sabine whirls around and snatches the book, its leather so worn that the symbol etched into the cover is nearly illegible: life. That is how Marina translated it, but the closest translation is “love gives us never-ending life.” One of Sabine’s favorite symbols.

She traces it with her fingertip, a hint of a smile on her face. “Yes, thank you.” The smile disappears the moment she looks up at us, and she quickly opens the book on the desk and flips through pages.

“Merfolk might not have their higher magic back,” Sabine says, eyes rapidly scanning each page before she goes to the next, “but there is someone who is fabled to still have it.”

The pages are filled with sketches as well as both merfolk symbols and human words. When Bill positions himself at her left shoulder, I go to her right. She tenses the slightest bit but continues perusing.

One page has a full illustration of a dagger. The artist made the thin blade dark and the hilt much lighter, showing off the intricate detail of how the cross-guard looks like waves breaking away from one another. The pommel looks to be some sort of stone, and the grip has a wavy pattern to it with merfolk symbols between the lines.

There are only two human words at the top of the page, but there are columns of merfolk writing on either side, as if the writer was trying to fit everything into one page. I catch that it is called “The Key,” but Sabine goes to the next page before I can read any more. The next one has a sketch of a naked woman chained to the floor, but she appears to be… floating.

Something sharp and icy digs into my mind. Images of sharp teeth and sharper claws, of missing flesh and—

“Do you recognize this?” Sabine whispers so quietly, I almost miss it.

I manage a nod. Then I point to the word underneath the sketch, which is underlined three times. It takes her a moment to understand that I am asking what it says.

“‘Beware.’”

I swallow, trying to ease the tightness of my throat. I did what I had to, for Sabine, for myself, for any sort of future we may have—

“Do you know who this… woman is?”

Adorable, Maire says. ***I maintain my notoriety as nothing more than folklore.***

Sabine goes to inspect the drawing again, but I slam the book shut. She narrows her eyes at me, pinning me in place.

She is rather clever. You should be more like her, then maybe you will find a solution before the week is spent. Maire's presence slinks away but leaves a lingering chill again.

"Proof enough for you?" Sabine asks Bill, taking a step back to put distance between us.

"Aye, ye have me convinced somethin's the matter." Bill runs a hand over his mostly-grey hair, bits of red still here and there, just like his beard. "What do ye want to do about it?"

Sabine takes a moment. "The merfolk are not responding to The Call. If I can get more of the luminescent crystals, I might be able to swim to the Undersea Kingdom and find Caspian."

At the sound of my name from her lips, my heart twists. *Please, see me. I am here.*

As if she hears me, her gaze flicks to mine, and I realize I reached for her hand. She pulls away, and just as quickly her gaze returns to Bill.

"That'd take too many, Goldie," Bill points out, gentle but firm. "Don't last long enough. Ye'd drown before ye reached it."

Muscles in her jaw twitch, and I note the thickness in her voice as she says, "I have to try." She clears her throat. "I have only a little time left before…"

Even though she does not quite look at me, I know she feels awkward with me here. I am one of the suitors, and she will be forced to pick soon. Her time is running out to reform the alliance and find a way for us to be together.

"I be sailin' tomorrow," Bill offers. "Ye can join me if ye wish to find more crystals."

Sabine mulls it over. "Will midday work? I have to convince Mor I am actually spending time with the other suitors."

"Whatever ye say, Goldie. I'll meet ye at the cave."

She dips her head. “Perfect. Lucas, we’d better return before anyone figures out we’re missing.”

I follow her lead. All I can think about are the luminescent crystals, and how the day I showed them to her was the last day I saw Sabine… before everything changed.

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

CASPIAN

"Marina be the only person to turn me down," Bill said with a dramatic sigh as he rowed with Oliver. The prince had taken me by surprise when he first joined these adventures, trying to do as much work to help as he could… although it seemed he was partially trying not to let his little sister outdo him. According to Sabine, princes in fairytales were *supposed* to be adventurous, gallant, charming, and selfless. Oliver tried to achieve those… sometimes. Most of my brothers did too, but Devere and I mostly focused on the first one.

Which was why we were on our way to explore an underwater cavern not too far off of the coast. It was a small party: Sabine, Marina, Bill, Oliver, myself, and Devere, who would be catching up shortly. With the pace they rowed, it was easy for me to lazily swim beside them.

Sabine's grandmother raised her brows at the pirate, but I noticed the corner of her mouth twitch.

Sabine turned to Marina, and it was easy to see their relation in the shape of their eyes and the set of their jaws. Not to mention the looks of determination and annoyance. "You turned him down?"

"I had a more worthy cause to pursue." Marina adjusted the sleeve of her Ambassador robe.

"Bit o' a waste," Bill grumbled. "Lots o' people could do that. Few can outdrink me."

Sabine giggled in glee while Oliver stared at Marina in a mixture of horror and awe. "You *outdrank* Captain Bill?"

"Never assume you know everything about a person," Marina said simply. "People always have surprises."

“You could’ve been a pirate,” Sabine said with a grin, tilting her head back to look up at the bright sky. “I can see why you turned it down though. I’d rather be under the sea than floating on it.”

Captain Bill grew somber. “Not if ye seen what I seen, Goldie. There be dark things amidst the beauty. Best stay above. Where it be light, it be safe.” He grunted. “Safer.”

There were many things to be wary of in the sea, but none like the Condemned. He told stories here and there about encounters, and each was just as chilling as the rest.

“But without darkness, how would we appreciate the light?”

I could not help but smile. Leave it to Sabine to think about things her own way instead of taking what someone tells her as absolute truth.

Devere surfaced on the other side of the boat. “We will not reach our destination until tomorrow at this rate,” he teased, brown eyes glittering with mischief. “Caspian, care to help?”

“Help what?” Oliver asked, but the two of us were already underwater. We pushed the back of the boat, picking up their speed drastically. The boat rocked as they shifted to rebalance themselves. Sabine laughed in delight, calling for us to go faster. Devere and I exchanged smirks before we obliged her.

We reached our destination quickly, Captain Bill calling for us to stop. For their sakes, we eased to a stop before surfacing once more. Sabine was already there, waiting for me, and I had to stop myself from kissing her, especially when she gave me that knowing smile.

“A little warning next time would be fantastic,” Oliver commented.

“You had fun,” Sabine told him with a glance over her shoulder.

He grunted in response, trying to smother a grin by running a hand over his face.

“If you will stay in the boat, we will check the area first,” Devere said. “It will not be long.”

Sabine squeezed my hand. “Hurry back.”

Aware of everyone’s attention on us, I merely nodded and dove back under. The sun shone bright, its rays reaching far beneath the surface to illuminate the multitude of colors the sealife had to offer.

“Sabine is almost as obsessed with you as you are with her.”

I shot my brother a look and flicked my tail in his direction.

He said with a chuckle, “I am merely making an observation. I am happy for you and hope you can find a way to make it work.”

“I do too.”

Devere touched my shoulder. “Everything will come together as it should. She has the dream bracelet, after all. Very little magic is more powerful than that.”

I hoped he spoke the truth.

We checked the area, especially the deeper, shadowy parts. Nothing more than a few sharks that changed direction the moment they saw us and eels that disappeared back into their hiding holes.

When we resurfaced, Devere announced, “There is nothing dangerous nearby. However, if the need should arise, there are merfolk scouts in the area who would come to our aid.”

I noted that he did not tell them why they were in the area: looking for our brothers.

We split into pairs and went our separate ways. Sabine and I took the farthest point out, waiting until we were above our destination to dive under.

She held onto me as I quickly brought us to the cavern at the bottom.

“Eels like these kinds of tight, dark places, so I will go first.”

Sabine gave me a look that meant my plan was what she was going to enforce anyway. I threw her a smirk and took the lead, gripping her hand so she did not lose me in the darkness.

The jagged edges scraped against us as we made our way through slowly, carefully. Everything was a bit dim for me, so I imagined Sabine could see little, if anything.

She jolted, pressing into my side. I hissed, and the eel retreated into its hidey hole. I did not scent blood, so I assumed it merely nosed at her. Still, others were near, and Sabine had a limited air supply, so I moved faster.

“Almost there,” I told her. She squeezed my hand in response.

We went twenty strokes farther before I found what I had been looking for: an air pocket. Sabine’s eyes widened at the luminescent blue crystals, giving the only source of light as we made it to the surface. She gasped, trying to catch her breath, eyes roaming over the jagged rock formation embedded with the crystals.

“How?” She asked.

“I do not know. Devere and I found it on one of our adventures.”

Carefully, she reached toward the closest crystal but stopped a hair's breadth away. “The water is avoiding the crystals.” She leaned closer. “They’re humming with magic.”

“You can feel that?”

She furrowed her brow. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Even after years of knowing each other, we were still learning. “Your grandmother said something about Oliver not being able to feel magic but that you can. Which she is glad for.” I gently moved a strand of hair out of her face. “As am I.”

Before I could pull my hand away, she leaned into my palm, her cheek still warm and soft. Despite the sweet gesture, a fire sparked in her eyes as she put her hand over mine. “Glad so I don’t get myself into more trouble you’d have to protect me from?” A smirk tugged at the corner of her lips, which she pressed into a thin line to try to make herself seem more serious.

I moved closer, my nose barely grazing hers. Her heartbeat grew louder, making me smile as I whispered, “We both know you do not need me to

protect you.” Closer, our lips nearly touching. “But I always will.”

Sabine threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. I pulled her close, and she stopped trying to stay afloat, trusting me to keep us both above water. For those precious few moments, it was just us, no worries or fears or others to think about. There was nothing to keep us apart.

The kisses slowed to a stop, but we still held each other, her nuzzling the crook of my neck. A sure sign she was worried and seeking comfort. Instead of saying anything, I tightened the embrace.

“I wish we could stay like this forever,” Sabine said quietly.

“We could.”

She traced the outer edge of a patch of scales below my collarbone. I caught her hand and pressed it flat.

“I promise you: the dream bracelet will always find a way to bring us together… as long as that is your heart’s desire.”

“Always.”

I waited a little longer, partly because she needed it and partly because I never wanted to let go. Then I reluctantly pointed out, “We do need to return to the surface. They will be looking for us.”

Sabine nodded and pulled away, but not before I stole one more peck on the lips.

We made our way back through the narrow cavern, this time no creatures around that I could sense. That usually meant there was a shark nearby, but that would make the eels retreat farther into their hiding spaces, not leave entirely. I had been too distracted with Sabine to notice their absence.

I surveyed the area just outside of the cavern. Nothing but vast sea, no presences to speak of within my range of senses. Sabine seemed to notice my shift in mood and drew closer, trying to see what was unsettling me.

When I was about to explain, I finally sensed something icy.

And then it shrieked.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SABINE

I go to sleep that night with my heart aching. The ache is still there in the morning, quietly waking me, as if I would want to get out of bed.

But the thing is, I do. Despite my heaviness of heart, I want to race to the beach and try to Call Caspian again. There has to be a reason I have yet to see one of the merfolk. When my father broke ties with them, their king promised they would answer when we Call again.

Then it hits me: what if Caspian is happy with his life? What if he is in love with someone else, and his curiosity for the World Above was only a passing fancy?

What if *I* was only a passing fancy?

The tan line on my wrist is obvious, a reminder of what I have lost. I can't help but wonder if losing it was a sign…

Well… nothing ventured, nothing gained. Even if those things were true and Caspian is no longer interested in me, our kingdom only thrives when we have a healthy relationship with the Kingdom Below.

I change out of my nightgown and into a simple dress, something easy to slip out of for later. I just need to spend time with a handful of suitors before then, that way no one will be suspicious when Lucas and I sneak off in the middle of the day. Odd, that I'd ever find myself in cahoots with him. He has been respectful thus far, but the way he looks at me, his eyes the purest blue…

I pause. Then remember the day of the duel, when I punched him in the eye… Hadn't his eyes been *brown*?

Not bothering to knock, Mor enters the room with a *tsk* and a shake of her head. To the servants behind her, she says, "Fetch her something more

presentable for a princess."

I swallow a snarky remark. "Good morning, Mor."

Sanne is just behind our mother, already dressed up in a gown of rich red with gold trimming and white lace. Her hair is done up nicely, twisted and decorated with jewels and a small tiara. No doubt she is counting the years until she can be in my shoes, having her pick of doting princes to marry.

"Good morning, Sabine," Mor returns in greeting. She looks me over from head to toes, her sour expression remaining. "Must you fight me on everything? Surely you know this is not an acceptable appearance for a princess, especially one trying to find a husband."

I wanted the dress because it was simple and comfortable, easily changed out of and into. But I can't explain that to her without getting into trouble, so I put on a repentant face. "Forgive me, Mor. I wished to get an early start to the day, and I had no one to help me dress in something more… appropriate."

Her brow twitches, but she doesn't challenge the half-truths. Instead she is distracted by the dresses the servants are holding near me. Various colors, all no doubt expensive and intricate in their making. Because I am already on Mor's bad side and the morning has just begun, I keep my mouth shut on what I think of them.

"Green is beautiful on her," Sanne suggests. "It brings out her eyes."

"Yes…" Mor purses her lips. "But she wore a green gown last night." Her gaze latches onto mine. "Sabine, darling, which would you prefer: gold or purple?"

My response comes a few seconds late as I try to recover from my surprise. Mor, asking my opinion? "…Purple." I do prefer the color, but the dress dips lower in the back, which means it will be easier for me to get into and out of it by myself. Asking Bill or Lucas to help me is out of the question.

A few moments pass, then Mor smiles genuinely. “Yes, I believe that is the best choice.”

That alone makes the process of squeezing me into a corset and the other layers of clothing much more tolerable. The smile doesn’t remain on her face, but the effects linger, leaving a brightness to her eyes and softness to her expression as she rattles off her thoughts on the suitors. Sanne hangs on her every word and agrees with every judgment. My mind wanders, checking in periodically to make sure I can aptly answer if she asks if I’m listening.

But then she says, “Now, Prince Lucas, his kingdom is not large, but they have the best seaport and nearly as much gold as we have due to their thriving market. Once he recovers his voice, he will be an excellent match.”

I press my lips into a thin line to keep from frowning. We haven’t spent nearly enough time with each other for me to aptly judge his character. How am I supposed to pick a suitor? Most of them I haven’t known for twelve hours yet, and the ones I have known since we were children… I shudder to think of marrying any of them.

And my heart still belongs to Caspian.

“She has barely met them, Mor,” Sanne cuts in respectfully. “Perhaps giving her the chance to properly fall in love would be helpful.”

Mor raises a brow at Sanne, and I find myself surprised as well. Sanne has always been outspoken, but her opinions tend to align with Mor’s.

“There is time to fall in love after the wedding,” Mor says in a tone that ends the conversation. Sanne dips her head and smiles, but as she turns her back, it slips.

Certainly Sanne sees her future when she watches the suitors trying to capture my heart—is she flirting with them now not just because she is a dutiful princess but also because she is as terrified as I am about spending the rest of her life with someone she does not love?

The servants get me ready quickly, and Mor sends me downstairs immediately after. Even though it is barely sunrise, all of the suitors are waiting for me at breakfast, standing behind their respective chairs. As soon as I enter the room, they turn toward me and smile. I do my best to distribute my attention evenly as my family dines with us, their eyes ever watchful.

After breakfast, Far recommends I split my time to start getting to know the suitors individually. Mor and he flush with pride when I agree with such a wise plan and pick one of the suitors Mor seems fond of.

I try to give him the benefit of the doubt. The second and third are better, but not by much. I assumed Vinten had matured, but perhaps that was too much to hope for.

The fourth is a man named Aksel. He takes me by surprise when he starts the conversation with, “I know neither of us like this situation, so I thought I’d put you at ease: this hour we spend together will have no expectations. Speak as little or as much as you like.”

“Oh… Wait, are you not expected to try to win my affections?”

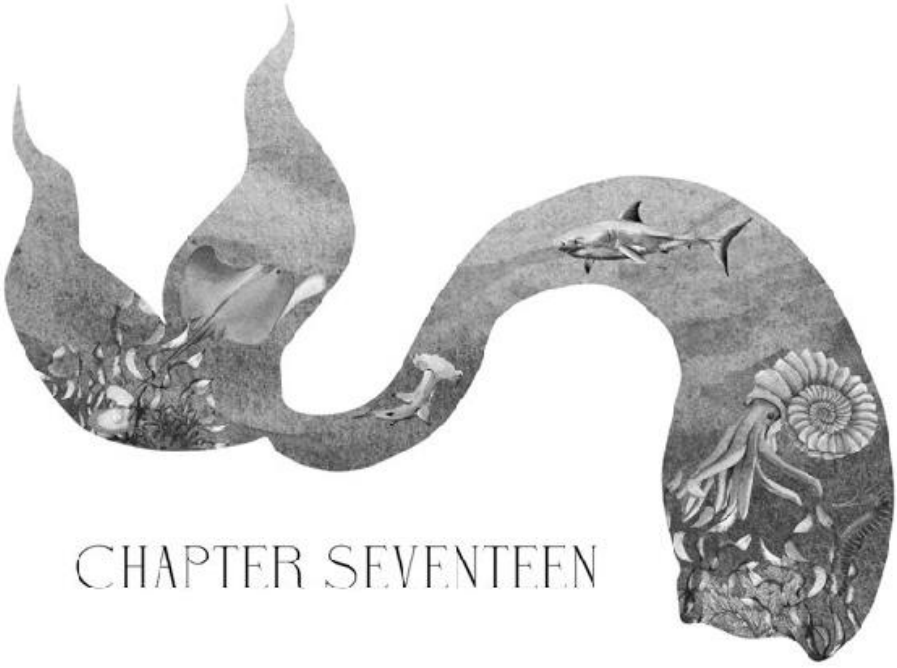
“I am,” he says with a sheepish grin. “But I don’t believe in forcing love to happen. Half of these men think they are in love with you, but they are infatuated with the idea of you.” His expression falls; his eyes widen dramatically. “Pardon me, Princess Sabine, I meant no insult. I am sure once they spend more time with you, they will fall madly in love. I mean to say that most of them have just met you.”

I find myself unable to disguise my amusement at his rambling. “You do not believe in love at first sight?”

“I imagine it is highly unlikely. Rare as a unicorn at best.” He studies my expression. “Do you believe in it?”

Do I? I was intrigued by Caspian the moment I met him as a child, and that grew into fondness and eventually love as we got older. “I… I do not know.”

It is Aksel’s turn to smile in amusement, but he graciously lets me change the subject. Time flows at an even, steady pace with him, and I wonder if I have just made a friend.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CASPIAN

To distract myself while waiting for Sabine, I walk throughout the palace, taking special care not to get lost. If only I can find the artifact, then I can get my voice back and explain to Sabine who I am.

I find it amusing, the sea witch says as she slides into my mind, ***that you either refuse to use your assets or do not know how to.***

The back of my neck prickles. *I thought you wanted this… artifact.*

Yes, but your predicament amuses me. There is not much to entertain us down here in the depths… other than visits from handsome strangers. Her cool presence caresses my mind, and I wish I could pull away.

What is the artifact? I ask, hoping that will narrow down where it could be.

You will feel it when you are near.

I should have known she would refuse to give me a straightforward answer. Why would she make it easy for me? Owning my soul is her goal, no matter how much she has helped me thus far.

Find it, my princeling, she says in farewell. The last of her touch disappears as I hear steps down the hallway.

"Lucas!" Aksel grins at me as he and Sabine approach. He is keeping a respectful distance from her, but things seem light and easy between them.

"Good afternoon, Lucas." Sabine looks me over, a curious expression flashing over her features. "Aksel, thank you."

He kisses the back of her gloved hand. "Thank *you*, Sabine. I am always glad to make a friend." With a wink in my direction, Prince Aksel takes his leave, heading toward one of the lounges the others are conversing in while they wait for their turn with Sabine.

The purple silk of her dress brushes the floor with each step she takes toward me. Too late, I remember to bow like the others do whenever she enters the room. Sabine smiles, and I nearly forget to straighten.

“Would you care to take a walk with me?” At my nod, she loops her arm through mine. Then she leans in conspiratorially, and I catch a hint of something sweet that nearly beckons me even closer… not that I need another reason to want to. “The palace is far too stuffy.”

Before we can get far, Queen Josefine rounds the corner, a few servants and a man in dark robes with her.

A curse escapes Sabine’s lips, and she jerks me into a narrow doorway, closing us in a small room to obscure us from prying eyes. She keeps hold of my arm, as if I would wish to go anywhere else. In truth, if I were to move, I would knock into one of the many vases and other decorations held in here for storage.

As their footsteps draw closer, I study Sabine in the dim lighting that slips between the wood planks, wishing for my merfolk sight. The shadows make her features softer, difficult to make out, and yet I am still drawn to them, staring at her slightly parted lips letting in small, silent breaths. We stand so close that I can nearly feel her breathing. But her attention is elsewhere, staring at the curtains while she listens intently.

“Where has Prince Lucas gone?” inquires Queen Josefine. “The guard said he passed this way.”

“Perhaps one of the other suitors would know,” suggests one of her entourage.

Only when they are well and truly gone does Sabine finally look up at me. Relief melts away, her brow furrowing, and I wonder what she sees in me. Her eyes dance across my face, setting my pulse to racing. If I just leaned down, I could finally kiss her…

Sabine abruptly releases my arm, making me realize her nails had been digging in. “We should be quick, before they return. Follow me.”

Without waiting, she eases open the door, scans the area, and hurries down the hall the queen came from. She moves surprisingly fast in her royal attire, although not as nimbly as when she wears what she calls her “adventure clothes.” I lose track of how many twists and turns we take, winding through the hallways, but Sabine does not falter, each step purposeful.

As we round another corner, the back of my neck prickles, but before I can identify why, voices carry our way, and Sabine loops her arm through mine. She flashes me a grin and giggles like something is funny… but it is not her genuine laugh.

The two suitors slow and raise their brows at us.

“Princess Sabine,” one greets, his gaze drifting to me every so often, “it is good to see you. Your mother seeks Prince Lucas; you could come with me while he goes to her. Not wise to keep Her Majesty waiting.” His dark eyes flash with an unspoken challenge, and I fight the urge to put my hand over Sabine’s.

But what does the Queen want with me that is so urgent?

“I shall send Prince Lucas to Mother after our stroll,” Sabine states, her tone leaving no room for argument. “I thank you for informing me and bid you farewell until later this afternoon.”

They look like they want to stop us, but they do little more than bump my shoulder as we walk past them. The heat of their glares, however, can be felt from all the way on the other side of the hall.

“I have no idea why Mor so urgently wishes to see you,” Sabine whispers, still holding my arm as if we are a normal couple. With her free hand, she plays with the cuff of my jacket. “Perhaps she has an answer about your predicament. But, if it does have something to do with merfolk, I don’t see that being taken well.”

She continues to ramble her ideas, and all the while the strange feeling on the back of my neck strengthens, stopping me in my tracks. I know that

feeling. Until now, I forgot that most humans lack the ability to sense it, and those who do, apparently can only barely do so.

Magic.

Yes, the sea witch whispers in my mind. ***The artifact calls to you, my princeling.***

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

SABINE

The shriek pierced my gut and set my heart racing. Before I could check to see where Mormor and the others were, Caspian scooped me into his arms and took off. Arms around his neck, I held tight, but with his grip, he wasn't going to let me slip away.

The sea was suddenly so much darker, so much colder, threatening to steal the remaining air in my lungs.

Just a little longer…

Pain.

Something collided with us, throwing us into a disorienting whirl that ripped me from Caspian's arms. Instinctively, I breathed in.

I choked and spasmed as I searched the darkness and tried to stop spinning. Light reflected off Caspian's tail, drawing my attention.

"Sabine! Go!" He shouted at me from over his shoulder, struggling with a merfolk-like creature.

The Condemned.

I only got a flash of sharp teeth and ashen skin as it snapped at Caspian's throat, barely missing. In desperation, I kicked, trying to fight my body's instinct to breathe again, to try to expel the water in my lungs. The surface seemed so far away, no matter how much I fought to get closer. There was no shadow of the boat, no shadow of our companions, just the light of the sun showing me the way.

I broke the surface and gulped the air greedily in between hacking up seawater. My throat burned, my lungs ached and spasmed.

"Sabine?"

Mormor and Oliver were on the boat, but no sign of Devere or Captain Bill. They looked at me in concern.

“Stay in the boat!” I yelled, the words barely leaving my mouth before claws punctured my leg and dragged me under.

The water swallowed my scream.

The Condemned yanked me down, piercing skin and ripping clothes in its frenzy. I kicked as I tried to reach the knife strapped to my calf—

Caspian appeared behind the Condemned. With a snarl, he wrapped his arm around its neck and squeezed. It released me to scratch at Caspian, its clouded eyes bulging from its sunken sockets.

My blood spread in the water, but I ignored the pain and fumbled to get the knife from its sheath. By the time I looked back up, Caspian had twisted its head sharply. I felt the pop echo; the Condemned went slack, black oozing from where his spine protruded, and drifted down, down, down.

“Sabine, we have to leave. Now.” Caspian reached for me.

But I stared, unseeing. I couldn’t move. I’d even stopped swimming.

Caspian grabbed me and shot for the surface once more. I barely kept hold of the knife, barely had the presence of mind to hold onto *him*.

Water sprayed around us when we hit the surface.

“Sabine! Caspian!” Oliver called out, and waved frantically. Beside him, Mormor calmly but quickly readied one of the guns as Captain Bill barked orders.

Devere surfaced closer to the boat than we were. “More are coming!”

“Call for the guard!” Caspian commanded, cradling my trembling body.

Devere disappeared, and I could feel a ripple traveling through the water.

Mormor snatched another gun, this one fatter with a short barrel, and shot it at the sky. A bright red light zipped into the air and exploded.

“We don’t surrender!” barked Captain Bill.

“We are calling for help!” Mormor returned sharply.

“More merfolk will be here soon,” Caspian informed us. “Devere just called for them.” He lifted me up and over the side of the boat, and Oliver

took me from him.

“You’re hurt!” Oliver yelped, and grabbed at his cloak to try to staunch the blood. I glanced down, seeing the red staining my sleeves and pant leg.

Caspian’s eyes locked on mine, more intense than I’d ever seen them. “Stay here.”

“No!” I grasped his hand. “Please, get in the boat. I—”

Caspian opened his mouth to say something, but he suddenly cried out, his face twisted in agony. A Condemned clawed its way up his back.

In the dimming sunlight, its skin was an unearthly grey-green. Its bones looked like they were about to pierce through with no muscle to fill its frame.

I thrust my knife into the creature’s neck just as it moved to sink its rows of sharp teeth into Caspian. The knife went through easily but rattled the moment it hit bone. The Condemned gurgled, black trickling from its mouth and seeping from its neck. Caspian shoved it off him, and the creature fell to the depths, taking my knife with it.

“Get in the boat,” I hissed, and tugged on Caspian’s arm.

Shots rang out. Mormor and Captain Bill defended us while Oliver and I heaved Caspian into the rowboat.

“Devere is still out there,” Caspian said through gritted teeth, wincing at the series of punctures in his back. He could have healed them if he’d had the time…

“Dev can handle himself,” I snapped. “You’re hurt.”

The boat rocked dangerously, threatening to pitch us all. Caspian tried to tuck his tail in, far too long to fit comfortably, and I noted more punctures and cuts along it, red trickling over the blue, green, and black scales.

A shrill whistle cut through the air, announcing the arrival of a rescue ship. It was still too far to tell who was on it, but relief flooded my lungs and eased my chest slightly. It sounded again, and Caspian flinched.

“Get them to stop,” he begged. “That will call them!”

I didn’t have to ask: I knew who the “them” were, and I was proven correct as the Condemned clawed their way up the side of the ship. Their tails split and morphed.

“They can grow legs?!” Oliver exclaimed.

Caspian and I exchanged horrified looks. The creatures scaled the ship with ease and leaped onto the unsuspecting crew.

Captain Bill unleashed a slew of colorful words that normally would’ve had Mormor chastising him. Gunshots and screams muffled some of them.

Mormor started rowing despite the tempestuous rocking of the boat. Water sloshed over the side to mix with the blood. Caspian pulled me to him while Oliver discarded his cloak idea and ripped a piece of his shirt to wrap around my leg. My brother’s fingers shook, and he cursed when he had to redo it because it wasn’t tight enough.

We finally reached the ship. Captain Bill had a sword in one hand and a gun in the other, picking off the Condemned as they came after us. A bloodied crewmate unrolled the ladder for us before returning to the skirmish.

Oliver took me from Caspian and lifted me with a grunt. “Grab the top and pull yourself over!”

Never had I been so grateful that I’d spent my childhood climbing and exploring outdoors rather than learning needlepoint and dancing indoors. Pain shot up my leg when I tried to push myself higher up the ladder. I gritted my teeth and, using all of my upper strength, hauled myself up and over the side, flopping onto the deck in an ungraceful heap.

I sucked in a breath, and it came out in a weak groan. But I had no time to recover: Condemned sprinted across the deck, lunging at anyone close. Crewmembers who didn’t shoot or stab fast enough went down in a mess of claws and sharp teeth, biting, ripping, *tearing*.

My ears rang from the gunshots and screams. I scrambled to my feet, ignoring the sharpness and aches lancing through me, just in time to roll out of the way of a Condemned tackling a sailor. They fell hard, and the struggle was cut off abruptly when the Condemned sank its teeth into the victim's neck. His sword skittered out of his hand, and I snatched it and lobbed off the creature's head.

Only losing the head can stop a Condemned, Caspian had told me. And he was right: the creature instantly went limp.

I retched, unable to help myself, my knees shaking like they were about to buckle underneath me.

There were too many bodies on board. And the Condemned kept coming.

A shout from below caught my attention. I saw Caspian and Devere return to the deep as Oliver climbed up the ladder.

"Where is he going?"

Oliver grabbed my shoulders. "Dev recognizes two of the Condemned as their missing brothers. We have to let them do what they think is best. We're useless underwater." He grabbed at the hilt of the sword to pull it out of my hand.

Any argument I would've made was interrupted when another Condemned leaped out of the water. Bill's first shot missed completely, and the second barely grazed its shoulder. The creature nabbed Mormor and let their momentum bring them back into the sea.

I released the sword and snatched the knife from Oliver's hip while he was distracted, then clambered onto the railing.

"Sabine!"

I dove.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SABINE

"…Lucas? Is everything all right?" I ask after he stops and stares down the hallway to our right. There is nothing special there, only a few servants passing through. Yet I can feel him tense like he is on high alert.

He snaps his attention to me suddenly; my breath catches in my throat. The smile he puts on doesn't do anything to hide the intensity in his eyes.

For a prince, he must do horribly with court politics. It almost makes me like him.

I shove the thoughts and feelings aside before I dwell on them.

"Did you see something?" I keep my voice quiet even though no one is close enough to hear. He pauses before shaking his head, and I continue, "There is nothing much that way. Mostly spare rooms for guests."

Lucas peers one more time, then walks the direction we were going previously.

I have no idea what to make of him. If he could speak, then at least that might help me make up my mind, but… there is something different about him from the other suitors, a welcome difference. The way he wears his emotions with such vulnerable honesty has me curious to know more about him. Not to mention how out of sorts he seems—there is a story behind all of this, and I am determined to figure it out.

This is not the Lucas I knew before. *Brown eyes… Am I misremembering?*

We sneak into Mormor's room once again, and this time I have Lucas face the wall while I change into the clothes I left here this morning. Out of the three times I check, Lucas doesn't peek once, although his stance is a little too rigid.

And… of course… the corset lacing is stuck, tied too tightly.

I mutter some choice words that would mortify my mother and sister as I tug this way and that in a sorry attempt at getting out of the corset. No such luck.

With a huff, I say sternly over my shoulder, “I need your help. Just loosen the lacing, and I’ll take it from there.”

Hesitantly, Lucas faces me but stays where he is. I would have expected the old Lucas to jump on the opportunity, and this new version of him I thought would have at least agreed more easily, given the number of looks he’s given me. Now, his mouth is a thin line, like he is nervous.

“We do not have much time,” I remind him. “Trust me, if I could do this myself, I would.”

His throat bobs, and I watch the movement before refocusing on his eyes, which are taking in the dress pooled at my feet.

“Lucas.”

He jolts and crosses the space between us in only a few steps. My heart hammers against my ribcage.

“If you touch anything other than the lacings, I will give you worse than a black eye,” I warn him. He acknowledges it, and I inwardly wince at the seed of guilt in my gut, even though I am protecting myself. It is like I am anticipating the old Lucas to suddenly make an appearance the moment I let my guard down.

I hate that I keep having to put my guard back up. It shouldn’t be slipping in the first place.

He works at the knot, less aggressive about it than I was. In the silence, all I can hear is my breathing and my pulse. When it takes too long, I risk glancing over my shoulder, only to find his face close.

His eyes flick up to mine; his fingers go still. And suddenly there is no noise, and I wonder if my heart will ever start again.

He is not Caspian.

I face forward and force myself to take three breaths… as best as the corset will allow. Lucas finally undoes the knot. I start to thank him, but he is already walking back to the false wall to wait, his back to me. If it's possible, somehow his stance is even more rigid.

From there, changing takes little time, and then we are back in the tunnels.

"Took ye long enough," Bill teases when we arrive at his room. He seems to catch on quickly that I am not in the mood, because he gets right to business, grabbing the supplies and giving Lucas a set of clothes to change into.

I angle my back toward Lucas and adjust the pack so that it sits better on my shoulders. Not too heavy, thankfully, only filled with food, water, and a few weapons for just in case reasons. Out of habit, I reach into a small side pocket to retrieve a leather cord. Dangling from it is a luminescent crystal I found in the deep, but, being out of water, it emanates neither light nor magic. The cord fits around my neck, leaving the crystal to rest just below my collarbone.

After a few bumps, Bill asks without turning around, "Ye strugglin', boy? Need help?"

More shuffling. Bill eyes me, but I remark, "You offered, you help him." Because I will not turn around.

With a smirk and a shake of his head, Bill peeks over his shoulder. "Good to see ye figured it out. Come, we be wastin' daylight."

BILL STOPS rowing and checks the sky. "Later than ye be wantin', eh, Goldie?"

I wipe at my brow and decide to be grateful that at least the day is sunny and the water is clear, giving great visibility. What the sunlight won't reach,

the crystal will help the rest of the way. “We’ll make do.” As I pull my hair off my sweaty neck to fix the braid, I notice Lucas staring lower than makes me comfortable… but the look in his eyes is haunting, distant, almost… intimate. I glance down to see he’s staring at the crystal, and I hold my beratement in reserve.

I’m wholly unready for that look to be targeted at me next. It lasts for merely a few moments, but it feels stretched out too far past its limits. Lucas breaks eye contact, and I rebraid my hair in preparation for the dive.

Why do you keep looking at me like that? I want to ask him. We barely knew each other before, and it’s not as if we left on good terms. But the more glances I steal as I shuck off my boots, the more questions spawn. Lucas is from an island kingdom, so why is he so *pale*? Why haven’t we found other survivors—or at least bodies of those who travelled with him? Why doesn’t he seem to know the basics, like how to use utensils and when to bow?

“Git ready, boy,” Bill says.

“He’s not coming,” I quickly state, avoiding looking at Lucas. “I move faster on my own.” *He can hardly walk—you think he’ll be able to* swim*?*

The pirate sighs and rummages through his pack. “At least take this, then.” He reaches over Lucas’s shoulder to hand me a knife. At first glance it seems normal, but then it glitters faintly in the sunlight.

“Had a friend turn crystals into this,” Bill explains. “She be brilliant, that one. Mixed crystals and metal, just like me gun.”

The knife balances well in my hand, lightweight but strong. I slip it into my shoulder bag and pray I have no need of it this time. While Condemned sightings during the day are rare, they are not unheard of. Other creatures normally leave me alone.

I inhale slowly, deeply, centering myself. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

Just another step towards finding Caspian and restoring our alliance with the merfolk. And hopefully finding Lucas his voice. I can do this.

For you, Caspian.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CASPIAN

I watch Sabine dive, her form as graceful as ever. The moment the crystal touches the water, it illuminates and creates a pocket of air around itself. She holds it close to her face and uses her free hand to help swim. All too soon, I can no longer see her, swallowed up by the darkness of the deep and obscured by the reflection of the sun on the water.

Everything in me wants to be back in the sea… even if I do not belong to it as a human.

"Goldie takes care o' herself." Bill studies me with a curious and almost sympathetic expression. He sits with one foot resting against the edge of the rowboat, but I notice the way his fingers hover near the gun holstered at his belt, the same one he used five years ago. In my merman form, I could sense the crystals embedded within it, as if he knew the magic properties they carried. But not even we merfolk remember them all. They help *somehow*, if only making the bullets move through water more easily—and killing the Condemned with a well-placed shot.

"She done this plenty. Has a knack fer findin' the crystals." He shakes his head. "Never can figure out how. Magic be drawn to her."

You have no idea how true that is.

"She tried tattooing herself with crystal powder. Worked fer a couple o' days, then…" He clucks his tongue. "Caused her lots o' pain. But she knew she had to go to the depths to find more crystals to make the magic instrument, so she can Call the merfolk back."

The boat idly rocks while we wait. Sweat beads all over me, and I consider diving into the water just to cool down. I wanted to go with her, but she so quickly rejected me… Granted, I cannot swim in this body.

“Goldie be stubborn,” Bill continues slowly, staring aimlessly at the water, “but she loves fiercer than anyone I know. She been tryin’ to find Caspian since the moment they let her out o’ the palace after the… incident.”

That makes the ache in my chest worse. Of course she would have tried to find me instead of resting like her body needed after such a horrific event. I held to my people’s vow to stay away, but I knew she would find a way back to me.

He side-eyes me. “She tell ye ’bout Caspian?”

It is odd, hearing someone talk to me about myself, not knowing who I am… but curiosity wins out in the end, so I shake my head.

His face scrunches as if he is in pain. “That be what I thought. Goldie be mighty protective when it comes to the merfolk and their youngest prince. Grew up together, they did. Learned one another’s ways, explored the sea… fell in love.” A small, brief, sad smile. “She loves him still.”

Each word wraps around my heart and squeezes, digging in just enough to be slightly painful. Yet I keep listening, desperate for more.

“The lass not be meant fer parties and dresses and high society nonsense. Her heart be with Caspian, with the sea.” Just when I think he is done, Bill adds, “I tell ye this to ask a favor o’ ye: if Sabine fails to reunite with him and she picks ye as her suitor… help her keep at least a part o’ who she be.” The pure sorrow and sincerity in his eyes are almost too much to look at. “Sabine be a part o’ the sea.”

SABINE

Having to hold the crystal near my mouth is annoying but better than not being able to breathe underwater. If my tattoo still worked, that would be helpful, but… I am appreciative to not have crippling pain over my entire body.

Everything is so calm this deep below this surface. For the thousandth time, I wonder if this is how Caspian experiences the sea, or if there are so many more secrets available to him. Perhaps one day he will be able to show me.

I stuff down the ache welling in my heart, but after having done that for so many years, I feel close to overflowing.

Focus.

The only source of light is my crystal as I navigate through the water, seeking out caverns and other places I might find what I'm looking for. Light dims slightly, telling me the crystal's power is beginning to drain.

I get the urge to check to my left, and when I do, I notice a small crevice in a large rock formation. From what I can tell, nothing is nearby, waiting to attack, but all the same, I hold my breath and stick the crystal into the crevice. No creatures, only a responsive glow. With the chisel and hammer from my bag, I carefully remove chunks of rock embedded with crystals. These are smaller than I hoped for, but I'll take what I can get.

The new crystals tucked away in my bag, I swim more, noting how the glow of my crystal has lessened. The smart thing would be to return to the surface and try again another time. But I'm running out of time. I've put off getting married for years in hopes of finding a way to fix everything and be with Caspian again. Now my parents will expect an engagement and will choose for me if I refuse.

I close my eyes. Listen, waiting for some sort of sign that more is nearby. I cannot fail. I *will not* fail.

Something tugs on me. My eyes snap open, but there is nothing there, nothing save the incessant feeling that I need to move forward. So I do, despite the flicker of my crystal.

It is too quiet, too desolate, too dark. Still I continue, knowing that this pull is stronger than I've ever felt. How many crystals could this lead me to? Or how large?

I can barely see the crystal and my fingers in front of my face. My shoulder grazes a rough rock wall, so I brace my hand against it as I follow the pull into smaller areas. Distantly, I think I should have my knife ready in case of a fight.

Suddenly, all of my senses are overwhelmed by a warm, blinding white light. My entire body tingles, as if tiny bits of electricity are dancing on top of my skin. Then it dims, just enough to see long, flowing hair and tails and beautiful faces.

Merfolk.

The crystal nearly slips from my grasp, so when I suck in a breath, I choke down saltwater and have to go into a coughing fit to right myself again.

"Calm, child. Breathe." The voice comes from a figure in the midst of the merfolk, her glow making it impossible to see the details of her… other than the fact that she has feet, which she idly moves back and forth as if dancing to music only she can hear.

"You… Who are you?" I manage. "Are you the sea witch?"

Just for a moment, the light falls and harsh shadows take its place, leaving visions of claws and teeth and icy chill and blood—

Then everything is as it was once more. "I have been told that is the most common name for me. But you may call me Maire."

“I have an ancestor named Maire,” I find myself thinking aloud, words slipping past my lips before I can stop them. “She disappeared long ago, drowned, her body never found.”

There is somehow both amusement and an edge in her voice when she replies, “Not everything that is lost wishes to be found, Sabine.”

Although the merfolk hover near her, they never quite touch her, and she completely ignores them. Caspian only ever spoke of one Undersea Kingdom, but I have to wonder how much has changed in the past five years. What if these are all that are left?

No, I cannot think that way. There has to be hope, has to be a reason for all of this, like a reason for why I was drawn here…

“How did you know my name?” I dare to ask. The pull is still there, urging me to draw closer to her, but I remain where I am. I can hear Mormor’s voice in the back of my head warning me to be careful of everything that lives in the sea. *If I cannot trust everyone on land, why would the sea be any different?*

Maire takes a moment to respond. “Caspian speaks of you. He misses you dearly, would do anything to get you back… just, as I imagine, you would do for him.”

Hearing his name from someone else is like a punch to the gut. I grip my crystal tighter, then realize that its warmth is fading. In the illumination of the room, this is the only indicator I have that the time is slipping away quickly.

“Caspian said he never found you.”

She makes a sympathetic noise and tilts her head to the side, long hair falling slowly with the movement. “Fear not: he never lied to you. I took his memory to protect your chances of success.”

“What do you mean?”

“The other merfolk would end me if they knew where I am, and I am the only one who can help bring you and Caspian back together, set things

the way they should be both here and in the World Above.”

Even though I know he isn’t among them, I scan the merfolk around her, seeking even a hint of him.

“He is not with me, Princess.”

“Then where is he?” The crystal’s power is waning, the pocket of air growing smaller, barely covering my face.

Stay calm.

She lifts her chin, and I can make out a hint of a smile. “Lucas knows. Help him bring back the artifact for me, and I will return his voice so he can tell you.”

My pulse stutters. Lucas. Lucas reacted to the drawing of the woman, a woman who looks nothing like this radiant beauty. And yet I know they are the same person somehow. Whatever magic she is using, I am grateful because it’s helping me keep my nerve.

Water creeps in, wetting my brows and chin.

“You took his voice?”

“He made a bargain.”

“What bargain?”

She *tsks*. “You can ask him when he has his voice back.”

“Where is the artifact?” I’m trying not to panic, but I know I’m almost out of time, and so my words come out rushed. “What is it?”

Maire leans forward. “I will tell you, but only if you give me the crystals in your bag.”

“What? No. I need them if I’m going to even make it back to the surface.”

“Not if you are quick. I never give anything for free, and you have nothing else to give me that I want.”

I rapidly run through ideas. “What about my voice?”

She laughs. “Your voice carries no power. It is useless to me.”

“My hair? My drea—”

“Ah-ah-ah, be careful what you offer.” She wags a long, thin finger near my face. I have no idea how we got so close to each other. “Caspian offered much to save your dreams. It would be terrible to take away what little chance you have of finding a way to be together.” With one sharp nail, she traces the side of my face, which is now underwater, my eyes barely in the effects of the crystal. “I can see you are falling for Lucas—”

“I’m not—”

She ignores my protest. “This is your chance to prove yourself to Caspian. I told you what I want. You’d better decide quickly if you will take it, because your time is running out.”

Mormor’s warnings ring loud in my mind, but they are still drowned out by the thought of finding Caspian again.

“What price is too high when it comes to true love?”

Careful to keep the crystal as close to my face as I can, I use my free hand to retrieve and hand over the others.

“Wise choice,” Maire affirms. “Now, stay still.” The sharpened point of her nail touches my forehead, and it feels like ice is bleeding into my veins. I try to recoil but I’m frozen.

I see a dagger, the same one from the sketch. But this time it’s real and beautiful, its very presence alluring. I want to hold it, to test its weight and balance. It’s in the palace, in a room too dark for me to make out—

The image disappears the moment Maire stops touching me, but the ice remains.

“Swim quickly, Sabine.”

Darkness smothers the light, leaving only the faint glow of my crystal left. Where the merfolk were is nothing but shadows that my mind quickly paints into monsters, so I dart back out the way I came, refusing to look back. But I swear I hear her say, “Leave her. She will be useful.”

My curiosity isn’t enough for me to stay and find out.

I scrape and bruise myself on the jagged rocks as I escape, holding the crystal against my lips. The sea is enveloping me, trying to swallow me whole, slipping over my eyes and down the bridge of my nose. I am too far away to see the sunlight of the surface, but with the weight of the crystals gone, I can swim faster.

Please be enough. Please let me make it.

I have to. I'm that much closer to finding Caspian, he's nearly in my reach…

Black turns to dark grey when my nose goes underwater, making me breathe only out of my mouth. I practically have to hold the crystal between my teeth, the air bubble is so tiny.

I can barely make out the shadow of our boat, which looks like a dot. With renewed desperation, I kick harder, determined to make it.

My crystal flickers again, then goes out.

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

CASPIAN

The names “Hedeon” and “Ammiras” rattled around my head, like the shape of them was odd but somehow familiar. Devere had insisted that they were our brothers, that they had gone missing… and were now found. Were now Condemned.

Echoes of Devere’s earlier call echoed through the water still. A faint call returned in reply, telling us the merfolk guard were still too far away to be here quickly enough.

What we were going to be able to do for merfolk who were already Condemned, I had no idea, but Devere insisted we return to the deep and stop them from going on the ship, where they would certainly perish.

I let my magic ripple over my skin, sealing the smaller wounds and staunching the bigger ones.

Screams from above stopped me short, someone shouting Sabine’s name. In the distance, I saw a Condemned wrestling with Marina, Sabine’s grandmother. I flipped around and rushed toward them, ignoring my brother’s pleas. Two more of the monsters flocked to where Marina and the creature thrashed, and a splash told me someone else was joining.

Sabine.

Knife in hand, she swam desperately toward her grandmother, her movements clumsy because her right leg moved slower than the left.

I shouted her name just as a Condemned tackled her. Rolling awkwardly, Sabine swiped and stabbed at the creature, but was only able to hit the chest. It had her arms, its claws digging into her flesh. She struggled against it, bubbles escaping her mouth rapidly, until the Condemned opened its mouth and sang.

Sabine slackened; the knife slipped from her hand.

A blur of red and orange zipped past, telling me that Devere had joined me. I tore through the water, grasping at the Condemned's stringy hair to yank it away—

Its teeth were already around Sabine's throat. She stared at me, wide-eyed, the Song already wearing off. Her lips moved, forming my name.

I unleashed my claws into the Condemned's neck, letting them sink deep. Then I tore it apart, severing its shredded neck from its head. With the jaw slackened, it was easy to pull the teeth out of her. I threw the head and immediately covered the punctures in her neck with my hands.

"You are going to be fine," I repeated in the most soothing tone I could. Near us, Devere and other merfolk fought the other Condemned, our people dispatching the monsters quickly and efficiently with claws and tridents and spears.

But Sabine stared at me, unblinking, her pupils tiny dots in pools of pale green. Her mouth gaped like a fish, and she began sucking in water—

I shot us to the surface and covered her neck again, willing my magic to seal her wounds. Too much red slipped between my fingers and seeped into the water. Sabine choked, a mixture of seawater and blood trickling from her mouth, but kept her eyes on mine. She mouthed my name again, tears slipping down her cheeks.

"Give her to us," demanded a voice I recognized, but it was not until he reached for Sabine that I looked away from her. It was the king, her father, in a rowboat of his own. A second ship had come after the first was beginning to sink.

"I am healing her," I tried to tell them, but the king and his men snatched her from me, pulling her trembling body into the king's embrace.

"I have you," he promised, tears welling and beginning to spill. Her head fell back as she weakly wheezed, her eyelids fluttering shut. "Get us back to the palace. NOW!"

“I can heal her!” I insisted, but they were already rowing away, and no one acknowledged me.

Devere surfaced beside me, Marina in his arms…

Or what was left of her: sightless eyes, dangling flesh… and red. Too much red.

I looked away, unable to stomach the sight.

“Bring her here!” called Captain Bill, waving us over. Devere obeyed, but I took off after Sabine.

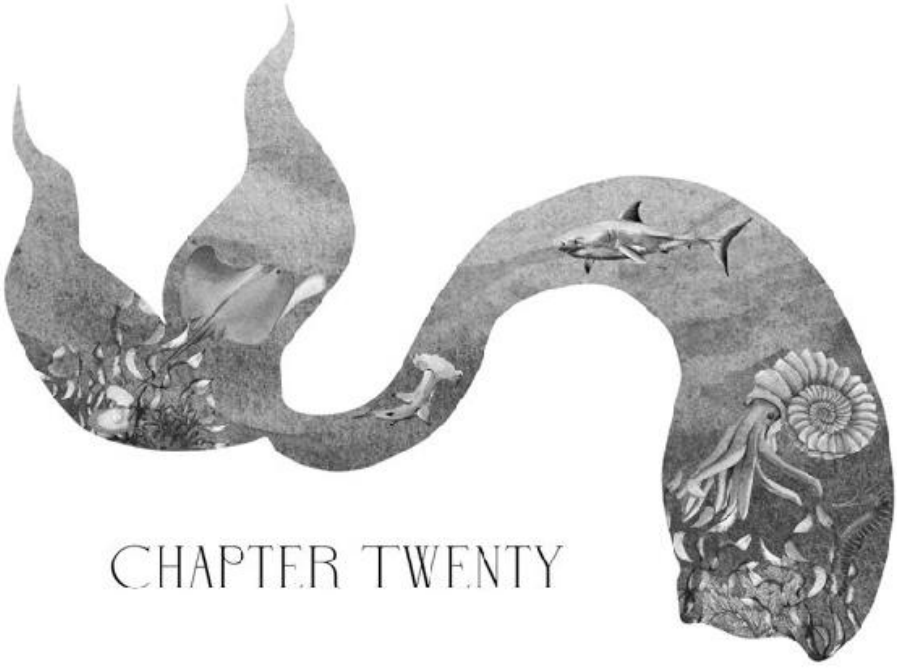
PleasebefinePleasebefinePlease—

A strong hand caught my shoulder and yanked me backward.

“Stay,” commanded my father, King of the Seas. His voice rumbled, and he stared me down as if challenging me to defy him. “First the bracelet, now you want to follow her back to the palace…” He trailed off, his dark eyes searching mine. “Have you fallen in love with the human princess?”

I had no answer for him. If he took this long to see it, then he was well and truly blind.

“Return home,” he commanded Devere and me. “Now.”



CHAPTER TWENTY

CASPIAN

Captain Bill and I wait in near silence, him bringing up random things every so often to pass the time. The breaks in between stories get longer and longer, and he sits up, hand on his holster, squinting at the water.

Sabine has been gone for too long.

I miss my merfolk abilities, being able to sense things that are nearby. If I could just get a hint of her, to know she is well…

Bill stands abruptly, removing his hat and jacket. “I be goin’ after her. Stay here.” But the moment he has one arm out of the sleeve, Sabine surfaces in a violent spray. She splutters and gasps, hacking up water, as Bill and I hoist her into the boat. Her shoulder bag falls open, and only a knife and some tools spill out.

“What happened?” Bill demands after he smacks her back to help her breathe again.

Sabine greedily swallows air, eyes squeezed tight. The crystal hanging around her neck is now black, not even a hint of magic remaining, as if it never had any in the first place.

Finally she opens her eyes and seeks me out. For the first time, the wall is gone, and I can see the fear, the longing, the exhaustion, the heartache, the determination. This is my Sabine, the one I know and love.

“Sabine?” Bill asks worriedly.

She spares him a brief glance before refocusing on me. “I met the sea witch. Maire.” She sniffs, then lets out a breathy chuckle. “Yeah, I was surprised too. She says she knows you, and you know where Caspian is.”

So close. I wonder what Maire told her about me. Clearly she wants to keep this game going, to make sure she still has a chance at winning, but it

also seems like she is bored and wants something interesting to keep her entertained. The fact that she spoke with Sabine at all…

I am not breaking our deal. Her voice slips into my mind, but this time I steel myself so I refrain from shivering. ***Just listen.***

I nod at Sabine. She smiles fleetingly, bites her bottom lip. “You do know where he is. Okay, well, Maire said you need the artifact to get your voice back. I know what it is.”

Sabine explains everything, and Bill starts rowing back toward shore. Time is passing us quickly, so surely people will come looking for Sabine soon. On our way back, Sabine forms a plan, her face lighting up in a way I have not seen since returning to the World Above.

“We have to be quick,” Sabine says to finish off the plan. “Bill, can you be ready?”

“Aye, Goldie.”

Good luck, princeling.

SNEAKING BACK into the palace is easier than I anticipate. Sabine makes me face the wall again while she changes back into her gown, and part of me is appreciative—I am unsure if I can go through that kind of torture again. Just a little longer, and I will have my voice back and be able to tell her everything… be able to hold and kiss her, tell her how much I have missed her.

“Maire said the artifact is in the palace.” Sabine taps my shoulder to signal that I can turn back around. But when I do, she does not take a step back like she normally does to put space between us. Instead she looks up at me. It would take very little effort to lean down and kiss her… which is all the effort I have at my disposal to keep myself from doing just that.

“I know it’s strange… but it feels like you’re not Lucas.”

Hope ignites. I shake my head emphatically.

Her eyes widen slightly. “You’re… you’re not Lucas. But I feel like I still know you somehow…” At my nod, she frowns. “But how? Oh, never mind. You’ll be able to tell me soon.”

Soon. I cradle that word in my heart and let it comfort me.

Sabine’s hair is still not quite dry from her adventure, but she twists and pins it up anyway, to at least give herself the guise of a proper appearance. Then, she picks up the last touch, the ribbon to cover her scarred throat. Her eyes meet mine.

“I know what it’s like to lose your voice,” she says quietly. “It feels like everything has been taken away from you: your opinions, your freedom, your choices… even who you are. People assume they know what you’re thinking or what’s best for you, and you can’t explain or defend yourself.” Her fingers trail over the ribbon for a moment before grasping my hand. “No one should be voiceless.”

There is so much I want to say, so many things I want to ask her. Soon.

She squeezes my hand and releases. “Let’s get you your voice back.”

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

SABINE

Pain. Darkness. Fleeting consciousness mixed bitter dreams and harsh reality in a blur that left my mind muddled.

I tried to call for Caspian, but it hurt. It *hurt*. And no sound came out. I had to find him, because he kept slipping away from me, unable to hear me…

A cool hand touched my forehead. I leaned into it and tried to say his name, only to be hushed.

"It is too soon to try speaking."

That was not Caspian's voice.

I forced my eyes open after the third attempt, and it took a few moments for them to focus properly. Mor sat beside my bed, eyes red-rimmed, hair and clothes rumpled. An embroidery hoop lay in her lap, the stitches not nearly as neat as usual, and the fabric seemed to have a few too many holes in it. The candle on the nightstand beside her was little more than a pool of wax, close to burning out.

Mor smoothed my hair away from my sweat-slick forehead, then grabbed a cloth from a water bowl beside the candle. She dabbed at my face with a tenderness I had not seen from her since I was young, and when she spoke, her voice was soft. "You will survive."

Survive what? And was she telling me or convincing herself?

I tried to swallow, wincing at the pain. My hand instinctively went to touch my throat.

My fingers barely grazed the bandage about my neck when Mor caught my wrist. "No. The bandages protect the stitches."

I wanted to ask the thousand questions plaguing my mind. Everything rushed back to me, the Condemned, Mormor, Caspian—

What had happened?

Mor squeezed my hand, her eyes taking a moment to find their way back to mine. “You nearly died, Sabine. Healers have tended to your injuries for the past week, keeping you unconscious so that you would rest.”

Nearly died.… Then I remembered: the Condemned had tried to tear out my throat. Even before the Song had worn completely off and the pain had set in, I knew that if I was going to die, I wanted Caspian’s face to be the last thing I saw.

But all I had seen was his horror and panic.

It had to have been a nightmare, nothing more. The sea was my home and I respected it and it *always* welcomed me—

But it hadn’t. Not this time.

You are going to be fine. That was the last thing Caspian had said to me, repeating it over and over, his hand covering my neck. My vision had gone dark, and with my last shred of consciousness, I had thought, *Stay with me.*

Did he know I was alive? If it had been a week without hearing from Caspian even in a normal circumstance, I would have tried to find a way to get to the Kingdom Below.

Mor’s shoulders slumped. “The healers had to use more than usual. You kept waking up like you were trying to resist the potions they gave you.”

Because I have to find Caspian, I wanted to tell her. *I have to see Mormor and I have to tell Caspian I’m fine.*

After a pregnant pause, her gaze slid away again to settle on our hands. Her grip tightened, her hand soft where mine was calloused.

I would have begged her to just tell me if I could have. If she was going to make me wait, the anticipation and worry were going to kill me, and I would seek out answers for myself.

“The healers highly suggested I wait to tell you… to tell you of what happened.” She tried to clear her throat, but it came out as little more than a

small, awkward noise. “But I know that you are strong, and that if I do not tell you… well, I will not stand for you leaving this bed before the healers give you permission.” Handing me a cup, she said, “But first, I will help you drink.”

Mor tilted my head back slightly and talked me through letting the liquid slip down the back of my throat while breathing through my nose. The sensation of choking made me tense, but she kept speaking in a comforting tone.

Whatever she had given me, it was not water like I’d expected. It was slightly thicker, and what didn’t slide down sank into my tongue, leaving it feeling fuzzy.

Mor sat back in her chair, clearly unbothered by whatever she had just given me. I wanted to demand she tell me what it was, wanted to get out of bed and get away from the way my limbs were beginning to feel heavy.

One shuddering breath, followed closely by another. Mor forced herself to look at me again, exposing the agony in her eyes. “Your grandmother passed on.” Blinking did nothing to stop the tears from falling down her pale cheeks.

Mormor… It was like being stabbed in the chest, grief sharp as it caught me off-guard. She, who was the Ambassador of the Seas, was not meant to die by the creatures who dwelled in it. She had so many years left to live, so much more to do…

“The Condemned…” Mor’s voice gave out. She took a moment to compose herself before trying again. “The Condemned are becoming too much of a danger, and too closely tied to the merfolk. We had to cut ties before they ruined our kingdom too.”

NO! LIES! They had been talking about cutting ties with the merfolk for too long for that to be the reason. That was merely the excuse. If we were going to stop the Condemned, we had a better chance of doing it together.

“I am sorry about Caspian, but we will find you someone else to love, I promise.”

I could not speak, could not move. Even my eyelids grew heavy, slipping down bit by bit.

Mor leaned over and kissed my forehead. “Sleep, my sweet. I will be here if you need anything.”

No longer able to fight it, my eyes closed of their own accord. Sleep blanketed me, my last waking thoughts of Mormor and Caspian.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SABINE

No doubt Mor will have me escorted by guards everywhere I go once she finds me again, so if Lucas and I are to find this artifact, it's now or never. But what Maire showed me was a dark room, and that could be any number of places in the palace, and the more we look, the higher the risk of getting caught.

Lucas. So, he isn't Lucas, but I have no idea who he could be. Hopefully, I'll find out soon enough, put this enigma to rest at last.

I pick a likely direction, only to have Lucas tug on my hand. He gestures with his head, and I make a snap decision to follow him. Has he already found it? How would he know where the dagger is?

I try not to let my nerves get the better of me as we return the way we came earlier today. Twice we hide as guards pass by, but I curiously see no suitors. Nor any of my family.

The quiet is unsettling.

Lucas stops abruptly in front of a hallway, the same one that gave him pause earlier. The rooms are inconsequential as far as I know, nothing more than guest rooms and storage closets, but I bite my tongue and continue to follow him. His steps quicken into long strides that are much more confident than before. He rattles the doorknob of a guest room near the end of the hall.

"Let me," I say, scooting him over as I pick the lock with a pin from my hair. After fiddling with it for longer than I'd like, I hear and feel the click, and the door swings open.

Tidy room, with barely any items to let us know that someone—presumably one of the suitors—is staying here. Even the clothes are still in the trunk near the bed instead of the closet. I start searching for any sort of

hiding place for the dagger, and it takes me a few moments to realize Lucas is gently tapping the wall next to the dresser. The thought crosses my mind that it could be in the room next door, but there is none, only the hall.

Are there more false walls and secret rooms like Mormor's has?

I help Lucas push aside the dresser and notice the faint line on the wall. We exchange an excited look.

Caspian, hold on for a little bit longer. I'm coming.

The false wall sticks at first, but after some shouldering, it budges and gives way to a stone platform and stairway that leads into darkness.

We have no light.

I tell Lucas to stay put while I slip into another room, steal a candle, and light it using one of the wall candelabras. After shutting and locking the room door behind me, I lead Lucas down into the secret passage.

The tingle of magic is everywhere and grows stronger the farther down we explore. It encompasses everything, and I cannot help wanting to run toward it the moment we reach the bottom floor. Instead, I make myself pause long enough to light the torches nearest me. Luckily, they work.

The firelight glints off the mounds of treasure and precious gems of every color. I recognize weaponry and art pieces from past ages I have seen only in history texts: a painting of merfolk making the original alliance with humans, another of them using the Song, even a full sculpture of a merman wielding a trident and shield.

And in the center of it all is a pedestal with a velvet red cushion holding the dagger.

Lucas rushes to it then halts. Hesitantly, he picks it up and admires it. The blade glimmers as if in response to his touch. He nods at me with a small smile of wonder.

"We found it," I breathe, smiling back at him.

I want to explore the rest of what is here, but I resolve to do that another time. Now, I am so close to finding Caspian again that not even a thousand

of these rooms could distract me.

We steal back up the stairs and make sure to shut the false wall and return the dresser. As I reach for the door, it flies open, making me tumble into the person on the other side.

Aksel stumbles back but rights both of us before we end up on the floor. Lucas watches, eyes wide.

“What are you doing in my room…?” He looks between us, then focuses on the dagger in Lucas’s hand.

I try to keep the panic from my voice as I hurriedly say, “If you want to be my friend, now would be an excellent time to prove it. Speak of this to no one. You didn’t see either of us. Understood?”

He swallows, then dips his head in agreement. “O-of course.”

“Thank you.”

Lucas and I hurry down the hall, leaving Aksel alone while we make our way back to the secret passage in Mormor’s room. I can only hope that he keeps his word…

I hear my mother’s voice coming from around the corner just as we arrive. With a curse, I bolt the door.

“Sabine?”

The handle jiggles.

“Sabine, unlock the door.”

“Go,” I hiss to Lucas. He stares at me, conflicted. I could go with him, but Mor has already seen me and would find the secret passage. Instead of explaining, I shove him toward the wall and call out, “Just a moment, Mor!”

“I will not wait! That man is not who we thought!”

I already know this, but how could I explain that to her?

Lucas pulls me toward him and holds my hand against his chest, an imploring expression in his gaze. I should want to recoil from his touch, but I don’t—

You are falling for Lucas, the sea witch's words haunt me. *This is your last chance to prove yourself to Caspian.*

I yank away. "Go," I say, this time with more edge. I can barely stand the wounded look he gives me.

Too many stuttering heartbeats pass before Lucas disappears down the secret passage. The false wall is barely back in place when someone rams the door. It takes a few tries for the door to break and swing open. Mor and guards burst into the room, along with a man I don't quite recognize. One of the suitors I didn't pay much attention to? There are too many to keep track of.

"Where is he?" Mor demands even as she inspects me, no doubt for injuries. Before I can think of a lie, she points at the wall. "That way! You might catch up with him if you hurry."

"No! Stop!" I try to get in their way, but Mor orders two of the guards to detain me. "Mother, what are you doing?" No matter how much I fight, they anticipate my moves and manage to keep me in an iron hold.

"What are *you* doing?" she snaps, whirling on me. "You Called the merfolk back without our permission, and one of them was killed by our people. They want to proclaim war against us and demand we tell them where Prince Devere and Prince Caspian are."

Devere and Caspian are missing. But the merfolk heard the Call and answered. Did they try to answer but something happened?

"I had to fix it," I say, my throat too tight to sound calm. "I had to see Caspian again and make things right. For everyone."

"It made things *worse*. I thought we would find you with Caspian, but instead you are running around with this imposter, whoever he is."

"*You* are the one who thought he was Lucas!"

"He never corrected me!"

"He doesn't have a voice!"

I’m surprised the heat of our stares doesn’t start a fire. I futilely attempt to escape once more.

“Please, I’ll tell you everything I know, but call them back. He knows where Caspian is.”

“Caspian?” interrupts the dark-haired man who may or may not be familiar. “That merman you were infatuated with as a child?”

I turn my scowl his way. “And just who are you?”

He tilts his head, dark eyes flashing. “Come now, I thought you’d remember me of all people, what after our duel.” The smirk he gives me sends my stomach straight to my toes.

He’s the real Lucas.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CASPIAN

Leaving Sabine behind is like ripping my heart out of my chest. But if I can make it to the sea and get my voice back, I will be able to explain everything and all of this will be over…

I stumble through the cramped passages and pray that I remember exactly how to get to Bill. After that, everything else should be a lot easier. In theory.

You have the artifact. Hurry! Bring it to me.

Is there something you can do to make this faster?

My magic is not as strong as it once was and has many limitations on land.

I bite back a sarcastic remark, then nearly jump out of my skin when I hear the queen's voice and guards chasing me. Sabine shouts, and I want to turn back.

Do not dare.

As much as I hate it, Maire is right: I need to keep going. Sabine is not in any danger with her mother. But I want her with me all the same.

Fear begins to creep up on me, telling me that I took a wrong turn somewhere and will end up getting caught. Just as I am about to lose that battle, the walls open up slightly and I see the hatch. I bang on it, but it is barely audible over the scraping of the guards' armor as they make their way behind me.

It only takes two bangs for Bill to throw open the hatch. I toss the dagger over the edge and haul myself up, my heart pounding. Bill seals the hatch as we get a glimpse of the first guard below.

"Best we leave now, methinks," Bill says with a crazed half-smile. He is to the door by the time I snatch the dagger and get back on my feet.

The pirate's room is on the bottom floor of the inn. He tosses something behind us, and we race down the hallway, avoiding other patrons and workers, until we make it to the dining area.

"Unfortunately, there be only one major exit easily accessible," Bill explains as he weaves through the crowd of people eating and drinking to their hearts' content.

"Billosephat!" calls a barmaid with a fearsome glare that could probably pin most men in place. Just not The Lucky Pirate. "You better be payin' soon, or you'll have Tanner to deal with."

"I always pay, Gloria!" He flashes her a grin, which flees the moment an explosion shakes the building.

Everyone either freezes or panics. But not Gloria: she zeroes in on him again, and he grimaces. "Add it to me tab!"

Then he yanks me by my sleeve, and we make a quick exit, elbowing our way through the crowd.

The sky is beginning to darken—thankfully the kingdom wall is close. If I can hurry to the beach and reach Maire in time, maybe I can make it back before any Condemned appear.

Bill grabs the reins of a horse tied outside of the inn and insists I get on behind him. Someone yells at us as we ride away, but my guilt is assuaged by our urgency.

"O' course Goldie be gittin' us into some real trouble. This be why I keep her around. Keeps things interestin'."

Bill urges the horse faster, and I hold onto him tightly, trying to ignore the twisting of my stomach. We jerk this way and that, making it nearly impossible for me to stay upright. A sharp turn is my undoing, and I hit the ground hard, cracking my elbow. Pain reverberates up and down my arm. The dagger clatters on the cobblestone.

"Git up!" Bill barks. "Ye git through that tunnel. I'll see ye on the other side." He hollers and kicks his horse back into action.

Dagger back in hand, I scramble into the tunnel before our pursuers race by. The foul stench hits me with a wave of nausea, and I stumble against the wall and force myself to continue.

"You two go that way. We'll go this way!"

I pick up the pace. *Am I close enough yet?*

Reach the water's edge.

At the end of the tunnel are iron rods barring the way, but one is broken. I maneuver my way in between, making it outside of the wall.

The sun dips toward the horizon. I sprint across the sand, hating the way it makes me so unbalanced.

"There he is!"

I risk a glance over my shoulder to see the guards on foot. But I also hear hoofbeats coming from the main gate not too far away.

A gunshot rings out, zipping past my leg. With renewed vigor, I take off toward the beach. *Please let me make it please let me make it—*

The horses get louder. A horn sounds.

I am going to make it. The sea is close, glittering in the remaining sunlight as if welcoming me back into its embrace.

"Cease fire!"

Another shot. A bullet tears through my back and knocks me forward. I land on my face in the sand. It takes a few moments to inhale, and each attempt is agony. Wheezing, I grab the dagger and drag myself toward the water, which is ebbing away from me.

"I said cease fire!"

Black overtakes the edges of my vision and slowly presses in, trying to force me to surrender.

Just a little farther…

I reach as far as I can. All I see are my hand, the dagger, and the water's edge slipping away from me.

"Caspian!"

I barely have the strength to move my head. Devere cuts through the water, making his way directly to me.

“Stand down!”

The black swallows my vision just as water laps at my knuckles.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SABINE

Mor has the guards escort me back to my room for "safekeeping." She visits not too long afterward and sits on the edge of my bed with me.

"Tell me everything."

I get her to promise to listen to all of it first before saying anything, and then I divulge everything I know. I start with how I found a way to recreate the magical underwater instrument with crystals, a painstakingly long process, and tell her all the events that happened from then until now. To her credit, she does listen silently and manages to keep her expression mostly neutral. Her lips press together a few times, no doubt to keep quiet.

When I finally finish, Mor waits a few moments to process it all. Then she takes my hands. "I am sorry you felt you could not tell me. After my mother's… well, after that incident, I feel like there has been a greater chasm between us than ever." She squeezes. "I know the merfolk mean a lot to you, especially Caspian, but we also have to keep our people safe."

"We were stronger allied with the merfolk," I point out, working to keep my tone as even as possible. "We have the chance to make amends and start again. Please consider it."

A hint of sympathy wells in her eyes. "My dear, I know you love Caspian, but—"

I jump to my feet and yank out of her grasp. "Yes! If you want to hear me say it, I love Caspian. I always will."

"You are a *human* princess, Sabine. You have duties to—"

"Damn the duties! You have Oliver to succeed the crown and Sanne to dress up and plan her life for her with parties and princes. That's not me, Mother." I point at the window. "Out there, in the sea, that's where I belong.

I should take up Mormor's mantle. You don't need me here, dressing in fancy gowns and living the life of a royal."

Mor stands abruptly, expression as sharp as her movements. "You are trying to throw everything away over a *boy*."

Heat burns my cheeks. How did our conversation devolve so quickly? I hate the way my eyes sting. "Even with Caspian aside, you know in your heart of hearts that we belong in harmony with the merfolk. You are cutting down everything Mormor worked so hard to nurture and maintain. It's like you want to get rid of everything that reminds you of her."

Even as I speak the words, I know they cut to the bone. But despite the tears lining my mother's eyes and the way she jolts as if I've slapped her, I cannot take them back. I will not. Instead, I brace myself for the verbal barrage headed my way.

But it never comes. She takes a handful of shaky breaths through her nose, her fists opening and closing, and doesn't once blink. When she finally responds, her voice is strained and sharp, each word carefully chosen. "For your safety, you will remain here unless I call for you. Wherever you go, you will be accompanied by no less than four guards. Get some sleep, for I shall send Alma early to prepare you for tomorrow's ball."

Then Mor takes her leave and loudly orders the guards to remain vigilant.

I didn't get the chance to ask her about the real Lucas arriving, or how she knew about the secret passageway, or if she'd received any word about the fake Lucas. I'd let my temper flare, and both of us got burned.

I curl up on my bed but can't bring myself to sleep. Or cry, for that matter. I give myself a few moments to let the emotions nearly suffocate me, and then I force myself to refocus.

If I'm going to get out of here, I'll need a plan.

FIVE YEARS PRIOR

CASPIAN

"Caspian, if you go any farther, you will be trespassing."

Ridiculous, someone thinking they can own part of the sea, especially from the surface to as far as the sun's rays reached. But King Robert and Queen Josefine were clear that we were not only unwelcome, but also would be shot on sight in case we were Condemned.

I could practically hear Sabine calling my name, and everything in me itched to find her, to even just see her and confirm she survived the attack. There was something within me that told me she was going to live, that the dream bracelet would not fail to bring us back together, but I wanted to see her, to kiss her, to hold her and never let go again.

Devere moved next to me, keeping to the new restriction like I was. "They will realize their mistake and restore the alliance. There cannot be that many Condemned left after how many we killed."

I had to wonder if he really believed what he was saying or if he was trying to add to the scraps of hope I had left. Probably both. Out of instinct, I went to play with the bracelet around my wrist, only to find it bare. Anger flared in my chest.

Devere eyed me. "I do not agree with his methods, but I understand why Father destroyed it: he wanted you to move past her, to heal and live life. He and Mother are afraid you will waste away pining after Sabine."

Her name brought a fresh wave of sorrow that I let crash over me, embracing it. "The dream bracelet will bring us back together."

He nodded once. "It will."

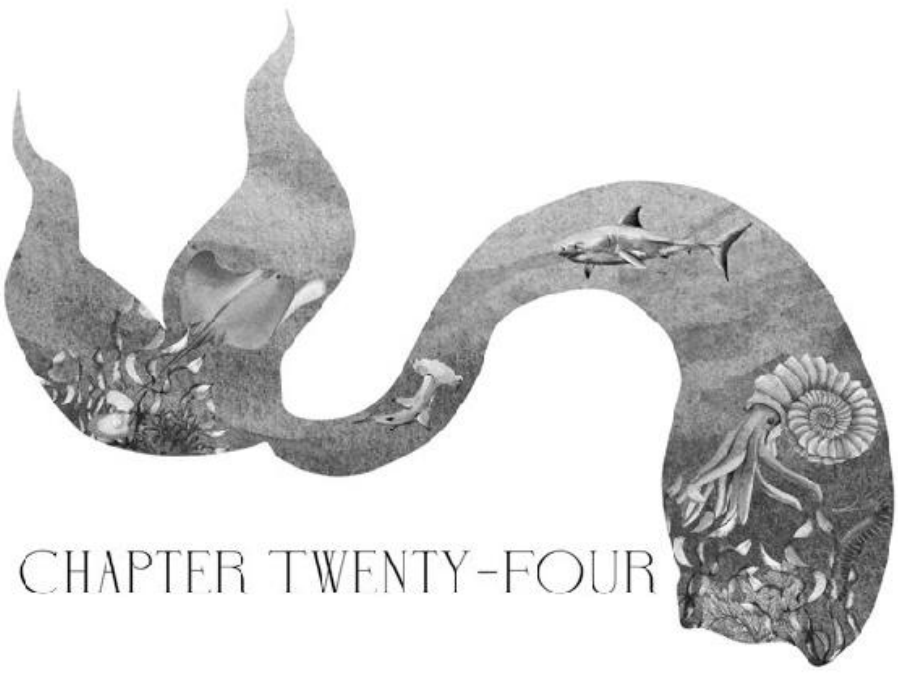
Neither of us mentioned that it would only do so for as long as she wanted to be with me. What if the Condemned turned her against the sea altogether? What if she decided she wanted nothing more than safe palace

life? It was not unheard of for trauma to change a person: Mother, who used to be adventurous and outgoing, never left the palace after nearly having been killed by her sister, a then recently-turned Condemned. She had been so sure she was going to find her lost sister, not nearly die by her hands.

Even if it turned into nothing but heartache, I resolved to wait for Sabine. She would find a way to me, to the sea. I had to trust her.

Until someone played the magic underwater instrument to call us once again, we were not to return to the surface. King Robert and Queen Josefine no doubt hoped our very existence would die out and become nothing more than myth, but I would wait as long as it took.

At the time, I just had no idea how long that would be.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CASPIAN

I wake with a gasp. My vision focuses a few moments later as my brain rushes to remember everything that last happened to me. Gunshot… pain… darkness…

Light hovers in front of my face, stark against the gloom of dark greens, greys, and blacks around me. No, not hovering… being held by a bony hand.

Maire. Her cloudy eyes stare at me, and she grins with yellowed, broken teeth. “You brought it to me,” she coos, pressing the flat edge of the dagger blade against her rotting cheek. “Almost did not make it, you poor soul.”

The crystal she hands me is keeping the water away from my face, but the rest of me is submerged. I feel no pain, see no blood… The only remnants of what happened are the tears in my shirt.

“You are of no use to me dead.”

As if to emphasize her statement, the Condemned circling around us snap their jaws and growl. She ignores them.

“As promised… here is your voice.” With a wave of her fingers, the tendrils reappear, this time forcing their way down my throat. I choke, then try to relax, but they take their time to leave, as if she is reluctant to give anything back. Perhaps she wants to punish me.

“Thank you,” I manage anyway. With a voice. My voice. Now I can speak to Sabine, explain everything. Together, we can make things right.

My teeth begin to chatter, and although Maire said she does not want me dead, I fear the cold will take me soon.

Maire tilts her head. “Sweet manners. But I do not do anything for free, princeling. You should know this by now.”

It is hard to swallow. “I have nothing left to give.” *Please do not take my voice again.*

“I took the payment already,” she informs me, shooting panic through my veins. Nothing seems out of place or missing.

What did she take?

“I amended our agreement to settle our deal,” Maire expounds. “I took four days from your timeframe, leaving you with three in total.” The grin turns into a wicked smirk that makes my skin crawl. “Which means by the time you reach the palace you will have one day left, princeling. The dream bracelet is still missing, the royal family knows you are an imposter, things between the merfolk and humans are worse than ever…” She cackles.

“What happened between the merfolk and humans?” I cannot help asking.

She clicks her tongue, or what’s left of it. “Your time is limited. Better hurry back to your precious princess and find a way to be together before the deal expires.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SABINE

I've run through my list of solo escape options. None of the viable options work, and the rest are lunacy and sure to get my mother's attention. If someone could make this even more impossible it would be her.

So, I decide to play her game for the time being. I have other options, but they require outside help, which means I need to get Mor to let me out of my room… which will not be until the ball. I am sure some suitors feel cheated out of the chance to get to know me before the night I am to make my decision, so they will undoubtedly flock to me the moment I step foot inside of the ballroom.

As promised, Mor sends Alma early in the morning for a day full of preparation for the ball. A few other servants help massage me, bathe me, wash my hair, and go through a whole ritual of beauty processes my sister absolutely adores. I know because Sanne joins us shortly after starting, preferring to have company to gossip with while the beautification process goes on. At first I listen intently to what she says, hoping Sanne will let something slip about what is happening, but when it's clear she only wishes to prattle on about the princes she fancies and what she imagines her own suitors will be like, I quickly lose interest.

"I will say Prince Aksel is rather odd. Pity, for he is one of the more handsome out of your choices."

My attention snaps back to her. "Oh, I rather find him… interesting." I try to say it with just a hint of suggestion, but cringe at how awkward it sounds.

Thankfully, my sister perks up, causing a servant to have to repaint a nail. "Do tell. Are you considering him? Have you made a decision at all?

Of course you haven’t. I’d wait until after the ball, see who sweeps you off your feet. You do want to marry someone you can see yourself falling in love with, of course. Oh, this is all so exciting! Did he promise you something? Has he kissed you yet? Do tell!”

“Give me a moment to respond,” I say with a chuckle, not quite as forced as I fear. “He and I took a walk, and we had a lovely chat. I think we could easily be friends.”

Sanne frowns for a moment before the bright smile returns. “Friendship can turn into a deep romance, I hear. Perhaps not passionate, but trustworthy and loyal and constant.”

She speaks as though she has knowledge on the matter. I force myself to keep a smile on my face. “We shall see. I like your idea of seeing who sweeps me off my feet tonight.”

Sanne eyes me. “You are in a good mood. What happened to change that so suddenly after your spat with Mother last night?”

“She told you?”

“I know when you fight. She gets tense and only answers in quick sentences, if at all.” Her smile finally slips, and it looks like she’s aged five years by the way her shoulders slump. “It takes a while to get her back into a decent mood.”

I study my younger sister. All these years, I’ve assumed she *wants* to be just like our mother, that she *wants* to stay on her good side and do everything that’s expected of her, when in reality, she’s been trying to keep the peace.

“You two are both to blame,” she continues. “You are both stubborn as can be. I think that’s why Mother admires you so and fears for you the most.”

Our mother admires *me*? After all of the headbutting we’ve done over the years?

“I’m not quite sure what is happening right now,” Sanne interrupts my thoughts, “but I would recommend at least going to the ball and playing nice until the end of it. Perhaps that will soften Far’s and Mor’s hearts toward you and the decision.”

I nod, unsure what to say. It feels like I’m getting to know my sister for the first time, or at least really seeing who she is outside of Mor’s shadow.

Sanne leans toward me, a conspiratorial grin on her face. “And if you do decide whom to pick, tell me first so I can sing his praises to them.”

One surprise after another. “I… uh… Sanne, thank you.” Luckily the servants are done painting our nails so I can squeeze my sister’s hand.

“Of course. You might be the wild child of the family, but I love that you are unapologetically you, and I want you to be happy too.”

I treasure that affectionate feeling as the servants dress us and do our hair and cosmetics. We joke and laugh, for what feels like the first time ever. It makes me wonder how much I missed in my incessant need to always escape the palace and royal life.

They dress Sanne in a simple, flattering light blue gown. That seems to be the key to all of her appearance, including jewelry, cosmetics, and shoes: simple and elegant.

I, on the other hand, am worried I’ll faint under the tightness of my corset and the weight of my gown. The dress is cream with blue-green accents and intricate beading that covers the entirety of the bust and spaces out in designs throughout the back of the skirt like waves. My curled hair is left down, only a few pieces pinned back to keep it out of my face, and the final touch is a ribbon around my throat to match the accents of the dress… and to cover my scarring.

“Is something the matter?” Sanne asks, noting how I trace the edge of the ribbon.

But before I can answer, Far, Mor, and Oliver arrive in their finery, looking every bit the royal family.

“Beautiful,” Mor comments as she kisses my cheek and tugs my hand away from my neck. “Tonight will be wonderful, I promise.”

I try not to cringe. I want to rip the ribbon away from my throat, but I know that will start a spat, and if I ask anything about the fake Lucas… well, same result. But there are bound to be loose lips and alcohol at the party, and I intend to catch everything I can.

“Of course,” I make myself say with a smile I hope isn’t too contrived. “Thank you for everything you’ve done to put this all together, Mor.”

She beams and kisses me again. “You will never be the same after tonight.”

I am sure she meant it to be a sweet, exciting promise, but it settles in my bones as an ill omen.

Everyone shuffles out except for my father. Oliver winks at me from over his shoulder, but there is sympathy in his eyes, and I know there’s more he wants to say, but not in front of our parents.

“You are beautiful,” Far whispers, tears lining his eyes. “Seems like you were just a babe in my arms not long ago.”

I loop my arm through his. “Time passes too quickly sometimes.” *And too slowly for others.*

We walk the halls together, Far setting a leisurely pace, as if he is loath to reach our destination and have to release me. Every inch of the palace is decorated in silks and lanterns and flowers, all the same colors as my dress. Mor must have taken months to plan this.

Far clears his throat. “I… Sabine, I just want you to know…” He pauses in front of the doorway leading into the ballroom, takes my hands in his, and exhales. “I want you to know that your mother and I want what is best for you. Whichever suitor you choose tonight, we will support you.”

But I will still have to choose one. I stifle a grimace and kiss his bearded cheek. “I love you, Far.”

“And I you. Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

The doors open, and a herald announces my arrival. Everyone stops dancing and conversing to face me and bow, all except the musicians, who adjust their song into a sweet tune to usher me in, a song Mor had written just for me. Each of us in the family has their own song, and it lifts my spirits to hear mine.

Mor continued the sea theme and coloring into the ballroom, with shells and even merfolk artwork in some places. The fading sunlight leaks through the windows and refracts off the chandelier with dangling mermen and mermaids. I have to take a moment to breathe.

Caspian, I wish you were here.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Thank you all for attending. I hope you have a pleasant evening.” Short and to the point, just enough to make my mother happy but not risk me giving into tears.

They clap, and a few suitors step forward, intending to be the first to ask me to dance. But one is faster than the others, one with dark hair and tan skin and a fire in his eyes: Lucas. The real one.

Keeping his eyes on mine, he brings my hand to his mouth for a kiss. I wish I were wearing gloves.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting,” he says, drawing me into a dance the moment the musicians strike up a lively tune. Attendees pair off and join us. “A terrible storm knocked us off course, but we found our way.”

I was right: he has dark brown eyes, not blue, and tan skin, not pale. He’s graceful, confident, and can speak—

Lucas sighs. “I know you and I did not part on the best of terms as children, and for that, I apologize. I had hoped we would bury the past and start anew. Surely neither of us are the same people we once were.” He twirls me out and brings me back smoothly, holding me close.

“I should hope not,” I reply, fighting the instinct to pull away. “But I shall warn you that if you try anything like that again, you will wish I’d

given you another black eye."

To my irritation, he laughs. "Noted."

This time, I cannot help but frown. "What, pray tell, is so funny?"

Another spin, and I swear his grip tightens when he has me back in his arms. "It seems you have not changed much at all, Sabine."

"Oh, but I have," I warn him in all seriousness. We circle each other, eyes locked. "I am much deadlier than before, *Lucas*. I have endured things you dare not dream of, and it has made me all the stronger."

His merriment dims, his gaze dropping to the ribbon at my throat. "I did hear about the attack. I am glad you survived, and sorry you had to leave your childhood behind so abruptly."

I blink. "My childhood? What do you mean?"

The next song starts, and before I can pull away, Lucas moves us into the dance sequence. My feet follow instinctively.

"I mean that all of us have to grow up sometime. You had your fascination with the merfolk, and your parents let you carry on with it for far too long, especially that infatuation with the merman. They wanted to ease you into real life, and instead it was ripped away from you."

I halt, causing others to bump into us and stumble. Lucas tries to restart the dance, but I refuse.

"Caspian is not an *infatuation.*"

Lucas tilts his head. "Sabine, there is nothing to be embarrassed about. I am trying to tell you I understand."

"You understand *nothing*." My attempts to yank out of his grip are futile.

"Do not cause a scene." He drops his voice lower, checking to see if anyone is watching. "I am merely trying to make amends."

"You are doing wonderfully," I snark, then mock, "My, Sabine, what a silly girl you were and still are. Surely we'll find a way to make you a proper princess and get all of those ridiculous notions out of your head."

Lucas pulls me even closer to him, a fire lighting in his eyes. “You are just as infuriating as before! I thought maybe you’d learn to grow up by now.”

“I suppose that’s something we have in common.” I stomp on his foot, and this time I’m able to wrench away from him and storm out of the dance area. He calls after me, but I do not glance back at him. Let spectators gawk all they want.

My dress is too heavy, so I cannot flee as quickly as I wish. He grabs my arm, and I whirl around to punch him, but Oliver breaks away from his wife and steps in.

“Release my sister at once.” Oliver, despite how amicable he is, can add enough authority to his tone to make my legs shake. That coupled with the piercing stare, and I’m surprised Lucas is still standing.

“We were just going to finish our dance,” Lucas replies. “Your sister left too early.”

“For good reason, I am sure. I will not ask you again.”

Reluctantly, Lucas obeys, lifting his hands and brows in a mock gesture of surrender. Ignoring his idiocy, Oliver leads me to a more secluded area, which is really not all that secluded, since we are still within sight of most people.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No. He was just being an…” I stop myself, scanning the room for potential eavesdroppers.

“That much was obvious.” He shoots a glare in Lucas’s direction. “I wanted to talk with you outside of Mor’s listening ears. We must speak quickly before someone checks on us.”

“Yes?” I eagerly urge him.

“I was among the men who went after the imposter Lucas last night. You seemed to take a liking to him, so I rode with men on horseback to find

him, and those pursuing on foot were already firing. I tried to call for a cease fire, but…" His lips press together.

"But what?"

"They shot him, Sabine. He crawled to the water's edge, and I was going to bring him here for medical attention, but he just… vanished."

"Vanished?"

"As if by magic." He swallows. "And there's more. I tried to stop them, but they captured Devere. He showed up just before the imposter disappeared."

"Devere was there?"

"Devere is here. As a captive. Far and Mor want to keep him as leverage to ensure the merfolk do not attack."

"That is lunacy!" I hiss. "That will incite them *to* attack. I—"

We are cut off by Mor approaching.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CASPIAN

I wake on the beach, coughing up seawater and prying open my salt-encrusted eyes. Everything aches and feels raw. I have nothing with me but the clothes on my back.

And my voice.

"Sabine," I whisper hoarsely as I push myself onto unsteady, numb feet. The breezes send a chill through me, and when I check the sky, I see the sun reaching for the horizon.

Better hurry, princeling. You have an hour remaining.

"There ye be." Captain Bill wipes at his brow and hurries to me, helps steady me. "Had a feelin' ye'd reappear. Did ye git yer voice back?"

"I did."

His eyes widen. "I know yer voice…" He grips my arms and stares at me, disbelieving. One of the few times I have ever seen the pirate shocked. "Caspian."

I nod out of habit. "Yes. I made a deal with the sea witch, and we have to hurry if we are going to save Sabine."

"Explain on the way."

We rush across the sand, headed back toward the tunnel I escaped through before. It is difficult to explain as we run, but Bill listens without asking questions. It is good to be able to communicate again.

Even more guards than before stand at the front gates. Torches there and around the walls are already being lit in anticipation for sundown.

I just need a little more time.

"They blocked that off," Bill says with a swear. Two guards with rifles stand in front of the tunnel. I try not to cringe at the phantom pain in my back at the sight of the weapons.

“Is there another way in?” I ask, hoping against all odds. With everything happening, especially with it being the night of a grand event, I expect they have found all potential entrances.

“There be no time, lad.” Before I can say anything else, Bill drags me into one of the bushes. Branches snag at my hair and clothes, and he shushes me, tells me to stay still. Then he pulls out a smooth stick from his pocket and blows through it twice. Something flies through the air, striking the two guards in succession. They sway and collapse with little sound.

“You have all sorts of tricks.”

Bill grins. “Every good pirate does.”

SABINE

“Your suitors are waiting to dance with you,” Mor says. “Oliver, what could you possibly have to say to your sister that cannot wait until after the ball?”

Oliver bows his head. “My apologies, Mother. Prince Lucas offended Sabine, and I was merely giving her moral support.”

Mor turns her attention to me, gold earrings dangling as she tilts her head. “If a suitor is not to your liking, simply find another. But I will not have you sulking in the corner.”

“Forgive me, Mor,” I say quickly instead of the multiple sarcastic comments on the tip of my tongue. “I was just about to find Prince Aksel.”

Her chin lifts infinitesimally, but she doesn’t challenge me. “Very well. Go, enjoy yourself. Tonight, it is all about you, my darling.” She squeezes my arm.

Is it? How can it be about me when I have no desire to be here?

I plaster on a smile and seek out Aksel, who is finishing a drink. When he sees me approach, he tries to smother an amused grin.

“You look as though you are trying not to be ill,” he comments. “Is there anything I can do to make the night at least slightly more tolerable?”

“A few things,” I answer. “First, dance with me.”

“If you insist,” he teases. We glide across the floor as we join the dance, seamlessly becoming part of the crowd. I wait a moment to say anything, noting the way Lucas and my parents are eyeing me. There would be no escaping alone.

The music shifts to something softer, and Aksel pulls me close, his breath tickling my ear.

“How may I help you, Sabine?” he whispers.

“Lean closer, as if enamored with me.”

He chuckles but does as he is told, his cheek against my hair. From over his shoulder, I catch Lucas glowering.

“I am not foolish enough to think you are falling for me,” Aksel says, his tone light. “I assume whatever this is about has to do with our friend, the preferable Lucas. You two were in quite a hurry yesterday.”

Was that only yesterday? It feels like much more time has passed. “Yes, it has to do with him. At least partially. I need you to help me sneak out of the ball and into the dungeons.”

He huffs a laugh and gently dips me before bringing me back into his arms. “Consider me intrigued. Although right now I would take about any excuse to leave this insufferable party. Ah, that is, no offense to you, of course.”

“None taken,” I assure him. “Perhaps we can lead people to believe we are leaving to go somewhere more… private?”

The song begins to wind down.

“Your mother will not disapprove?”

“She will be glad to see me take an interest in any of the suitors.”

We stop, and when some vacate the dance floor or switch partners, Aksel leans in, and I can nearly feel his smile. “Are you leading or shall I?”

Eyes on us, I kiss Aksel’s cheek and bring him with me off the dance floor. I hope I look smitten, because all I can think is that Devere is captured and I’m afraid to even consider how they are treating him.

“Stop here.” I grab his arm. “They’re still watching.”

“I assume they’ll continue watching. This was thrown in your honor.”

“Yes, but Mor may become suspicious at us leaving so soon.”

“This was your idea,” he reminds me with a playful air.

I have to stop myself from sticking my tongue out at him. “I know that. I’m coming up with this plan as I go—”

“Sabine, my darling,” Mor interrupts once again. “Is everything all right?”

“We are having trouble hearing over the music, Your Majesty,” Aksel replies smoothly. “We wished to find somewhere easier to converse.”

“Without a chaperone?”

You never made me have one before. But I know she is more worried about me sneaking away from the party.

“I will chaperone them, Mother.” Sanne approaches, elegant and light on her feet, a sweet, innocent smile to finish off the image of the perfect princess.

I start to turn her down, but Aksel cuts me off: “What a wonderful idea. We would love to have you along, Princess Sanne. I look forward to getting to know my potential future sister-in-law.”

A few micro expressions flit across Mor’s features before she settles into a reserved smile. “Yes, that sounds lovely. You may converse in the study.” Before we can leave, she puts a hand on Sanne’s shoulder. “Bring them back in half an hour.”

“As you wish, Mor.”

Mother pats her cheek and reluctantly walks away. I let loose the breath I’d been holding and try not to look too hurried in leaving.

“This is so exciting,” Sanne squeals. “Love blooming before my eyes. Ah! So beautiful. I—Sabine, the study is down this hall.”

“I know.” I continue, not daring to slow down. How long have they had Devere? Is he hurt? Was he answering my Call? If he is hurt and captured because of me…

“Sabine. Where are we going?”

Aksel answers this time. “I’m afraid we are taking a detour first, Princess. I do hope you will help us or at the very least keep this to yourself.”

“Help you with what?”

I spare her a quick peek over my shoulder. “They have Devere and I intend to set him free.”

“Devere…?”

“One of Caspian’s brothers.”

“Why would they—we—have one of the merfolk?”

“The merfolk answered my Call—”

“You *Called* them?”

I whirl around. “I have neither the time nor the patience to answer all of your questions. Please, Sanne, either help us or keep this to yourself. I am begging you. We could stop a war by setting him free.”

Sanne worries at her bottom lip with her teeth, brow furrowed. “All right. But let us be quick about it, or else Mor will start to suspect.”

But the guards at the entrance of the dungeons are alert and notice us before we have time to hide and come up with a plan.

I wish I had one of Bill’s sleep darts…

“Princess Sabine? Princess Sanne? Should you not be at the party?” one asks, eyeing Aksel suspiciously.

“I wished to give Prince Aksel a more in-depth tour of the palace,” I say the first thing that comes to mind. “If he is to potentially be my… husband, then this would be his home too.” In all honesty, I have no idea if we would stay here—more likely than not, we would go to his kingdom, but it’s too late to change what I’ve said.

“Pardon me, gentlemen,” Aksel cuts in, strolling toward them. He takes one’s hand and shakes it heartily. “Prince Aksel of Vinquiss. Pleasure to meet you. And I am terribly sorry.”

“For what?” the guard askes, confused.

Aksel yanks him forward, making him drop the gun, and dances around him so that he can easily hook his arm around the man’s neck.

The second guard shouts something unintelligible, and I hurry to snatch the weapon and hit him in the back of the head. He collapses.

Aksel looks at me with concern.

“Sabine!” Sanne’s jaw drops.

“Well, I couldn’t very well kick him or pull a stunt like Aksel. This dress weighs more than I do.”

The guard finally slumps in Aksel’s arms, and the prince slowly lowers him to the floor. “All the same, that was more aggressive than either of us were ready for.”

“Says the man who attacked without warning.”

“No time to give a warning.” He smirks at me. “Come now, let’s hide them before we draw more attention.”

After taking care of them, we go through the door and descend into the poorly lit dungeons. Apparently Mor thought either I wouldn’t get this far or wouldn’t find out about Devere, because there are no more guards to deal with. What reason would I have to come here when I’ve so rarely done so in the past?

I can only imagine the amount of dirt smudges this will leave on my gown, but I could always find a way to forgo the ball. Getting Devere out of this place will surely take enough time to do that.

The air is cold and damp the farther we go, and my heels catch between the stones a number of times. Prisoners reach through the bars to grab at me, hurling insults and mockeries, but I ignore all of them.

“Devere!” I call. “Devere, it’s me, Sabine. Where are you?”

“Sabine?” The voice sounds garbled.

I take a sharp right and snag my skirt on a bent nail sticking out of a crumbling wall. Sanne squeals and covers her mouth, but I just sigh and set myself free.

“Devere?”

“Sabine.”

He is cramped inside of a water-filled glass tank that I would barely have room to sit in with my legs out. His tail is much longer, and the ways it folds to fit look wildly uncomfortable. His sunset coloring is one of the

few bright things in the dungeon, but even it looks muted from how I remember it being.

“I’m so sorry.” I look around for a way to free him. “I should have stayed until you answered my Call; none of this would’ve happened.”

But Devere will hear none of it. “Did Caspian find you?” After so many years not having seen one of the merfolk, it feels surreal. He and Caspian are so alike yet so different, and the ache in my chest almost brings me to my knees.

“What?”

Devere presses something against the glass. “He was trying to fix this and bring you back together. She—” He stops abruptly and shivers… similar to how Lucas did.

Then I notice the pendant hanging from his necklace, the merfolk symbol meaning death. That was part of the symbol on the page with the sea witch sketch.

“Where is he?” When Devere doesn’t answer, I press again. “Did he make a deal with the sea witch? Maire?”

Blood drains from his face, but still he says nothing.

My heart shatters; my knees nearly give out. “Lucas is Caspian. He became a human to find me.”

Devere simply nods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CASPIAN

Other guards berate us for being late and leaving our stations as we make our way to the palace. Luckily none of them know my face or notice the way that the uniform sleeves do not quite cover my wrists. I keep my head down and follow Bill's lead.

The sky is beginning to darken…

When we reach the palace entrance, a guard with extra embellishments on his uniform eyes us and demands to know why we are not at our posts.

"We were asked to patrol the grounds before taking our placement at the ball," Bill answers in a voice so different from his own I have to snap my mouth shut before my jaw falls open. "It took a bit longer than we expected, but we wanted to be thorough. Better to be safe than sorry, especially on an occasion as important as tonight."

"Enough," the man says in annoyance. "Hurry before the Queen takes notice and has my head for it."

Our heavy boots make a considerable amount of noise on the marble floor, and I wonder how the guards are expected to run in them or have any sort of stealth. But the closer we get to the ballroom, the more music and chatter fills the atmosphere, covering any noise we make.

Everything is decorated in shades of white, blue, and green, and it takes me a moment to realize just how much merfolk-inspired pieces are here. But then my attention snaps to the dance floor, seeking out any sign of Sabine. The suitors stand off to the sides, whispering amongst themselves or glancing at the back doors. I am very glad to have avoided needing to dance.

"Where be Goldie?" Bill whispers.

I look up. Faded sunlight still peeks through the windows near the ceiling.

Sabine, where are you?

I notice Queen Josefine eyeing us. Oliver pats her arm, says something, and heads our way. At first I think to run, then decide against it—too much attention drawn, and if anyone has an idea where Sabine is, he will.

“I did not think you would attend, Bill. You should know better than to be dressed as a guard standing in the middle of guests. You stick out like a sore thumb, and Father and Mother would have gladly permitted your attendance,” Oliver says to the pirate. His eyes widen as he gets a closer look at me. I see the question form in his eyes along with the different actions he could take.

“I am Caspian,” I tell him quickly and quietly. Now his mouth falls open as he studies me. “I will explain more later but I must find Sabine.”

Oliver quickly recovers and clears his throat. “Sabine left with Prince Aksel and Sanne out the back way. They were supposedly headed to the study.”

“But?”

“But I told her Devere is being held captive—”

I grab his arm instinctively. Bill instantly finds a pressure point in my wrist, forcing me to release him.

“Ye be drawin’ attention,” Bill hisses.

Oliver cuts in quickly, “To use your words, I will explain more later, but we—”

“YOU.” A man I do not recognize struts toward us. “You are the imposter! Guards! Seize him at once!”

The music cuts off abruptly with a whine; dancers turn about, looking to see what is causing the interruption. The king and queen are already crossing the room, guards rushing toward us from all directions.

“I am—” I start to say, but the butt of the gun into my gut knocks the wind from me and brings me to my knees. Someone keeps me down with a hand on my shoulder and yanks my head back by my hair, knocking the hat from my head.

“Who are you?” King Robert demands. Although the crowd gives us a wide berth, their attentions remain fastened on us.

“I am Prince Caspian of the Kingdom Below,” I answer. “I made a deal with the sea witch to become human temporarily so I might see Sabine.”

“Do not be preposterous,” Josefine scoffs. “Tell us the truth. Did you hope to sweep our daughter off her feet and take riches and fame with you?”

“The truth is still the truth even if it does not fit your logic,” I reply, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice as the light dims further. “You know magic exists, Queen Josefine. Marina knew it, taught it, treasured it __”

“You will not speak of my mother!”

“Mor, please, listen!” pleads Oliver. “Let us take him to Sabine. She will know the truth of it.”

“This is absurd,” Lucas huffs, then silences at a withering glare from the Queen.

“Take him to Sabine,” King Robert orders. “But keep him under—”

Soul-splitting shrieks pierce through the palace. Screams and shouts follow… but the shrieks…

“Condemned!” cries a guard as he races down the hall toward us. Those in the room already scramble to unsheathe weapons and seal the huge doors, but the creatures are far too quick on their transformed feet. They lunge into the ballroom, their claws slicing into anyone and everyone in their path. Red sprays and spatters the floor, white tablecloths—

Oliver yanks the guard detaining me and snaps at him to do his duty. I take the opening to rush toward the back door, Bill and Oliver at my heels.

I am coming…

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SABINE

Aksel and I finally pry the lid off the tank and let it shatter on the stone floor. I have to do something or else I will succumb to the tears, thinking about how Oliver said the imposter Lucas was shot and disappeared. No, I cannot dwell on it, or I'll go insane. First, set Devere free. Then we can find Caspian.

Sanne watches from the doorway, mesmerized by the fact that there is a real merman.

Devere shifts into a more comfortable sitting position, his tail flopping over the side. He sucks in air, gills flaring with each breath, and I hate whoever didn't leave him holes in the top of the glass at the very least.

Leaning on the edge, he presses the bracelet into my hand. "You have to find him before it is too late."

"Before what is too late?" I ask, even though I'm terrified of the answer. What wouldn't Caspian risk for me, for us? If I were in his place, I don't know where I would draw the line.

When I take too long, Devere snatches the bracelet again and fastens it around my wrist. It thrums as it did before, but weakly, the colors barely flickering at my touch.

"I cannot tell you," he says sadly. Then stiffens, pupils shrinking. "She is coming."

I know who he means, but the thought is too terrible to comprehend more than the fear digging its claws into my gut. "We have to get you out of here."

"Sabine."

I know that voice. *I know that voice.* That is the voice that spoke to me of the undersea world, that made me promises and gave declarations of his

love. That is the voice that sang to me and then brought me back before it was too late. That is the voice that has haunted my dreams both awake and asleep, and my heart thuds painfully at the sound of it.

Tears well quickly, and I blink them away as I turn around to take him in with new eyes, knowing eyes. He stands near Sanne, Captain Bill and Oliver with him. And I hate myself for not realizing sooner. How could I have missed those eyes, that loving look, that kind smile?

At that moment, I see him. Not as human, not as merfolk, but as Caspian. My Caspian.

“Caspian,” I manage, then run into his awaiting arms. He smells of the sea, just as I remember, and he holds me tightly, his touch familiar and comforting.

I can’t believe I didn’t realize sooner.

He leans back so he can see my face and brush away the stray hairs. I almost rush the kiss, desperate to feel him and know this is real and happening, but I rein myself in and let him close the gap between us…

Our noses brush when he suddenly convulses and cries out. His head hits my cheekbone, but I recover quickly and try to hold him up. His weight increases, and something knocks me to the floor.

Caspian is curled up in agony, claws digging into the ground, teeth bared, gills flaring, tail tense—

Sanne muffles her own squeal, staring in amazement at the transformation before her. Oliver and Bill have taken steps toward the wall to give Caspian room.

“She calls us back,” Devere says through clenched teeth.

I reach for Caspian, but he disappears, leaving behind a small puddle of seawater. “No. No no no no no.” I check over my shoulder to see Devere is gone as well, then lock eyes with Bill as I scramble to my feet. “I have to save them.”

Shrieks. My racing heart stops; panic floods my veins.

Pain and cold and death—

“Hurry.” Bill tugs me along by my arm, drawing me out of my claustrophobic mind. He already has his gun out, the symbols a soft glow in the darkness.

“Where are we going?” Oliver asks, following behind us as we make our way back out of the dungeon. The prisoners seem to understand the weight of the situation and make all sorts of demands about releasing them, even though they are much safer than we are.

“Out to sea,” I answer, finding my voice. “Take Sanne somewhere safe.”

“Are you insane?” Oliver snatches my wrist, halting us halfway up the stairs.

“Let go, boy,” Bill warns. “We be runnin’ out o’ time.”

Gunshots and shouts. Gurgling.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

“Take her somewhere safe,” I say, my voice strained as my chest tightens.

“There is nowhere safe! The palace is being overrun by Condemned as we speak!”

“You think coming with us will be any safer?”

The door hinges break. Bill immediately shoots, and a Condemned collapses backward, face no longer recognizable, just hanging pieces of green and black flesh. What little I ate leaps up my throat, but I manage to keep it down. Sanne, on the other hand, retches on the wall and cries.

Putting an arm around our sister, Oliver states, “We stay together,” leaving no further room for argument.

CASPIAN

One moment I am writhing on the floor of the dungeons, and the next I am in the sea, Devere beside me. I expected to be in the cavern, surrounded by an unnatural darkness and the snapping of Condemned, but I only had one part of it right: the Condemned are here… in the Undersea Palace. Just outside of the palace, I can hear screaming and fighting, but here, the Condemned only move in warning toward our parents and brothers, who are being held captive in one corner of the room. They are battered and bruised but very much alive.

At the throne, Maire sits, legs crossed so that the slit of her dress falls over her knee to expose her long legs. Her skin is losing its greenish hue, and slowly the flesh knits itself back together, bit by bit. She grins wickedly in my direction.

“Caspian! Devere! So good of you to join us.” She crooks a finger, and we instantly swim toward her as if pulled by an invisible force. “I do apologize for my ghastly appearance, but casting magic elsewhere has slowed down my healing.” Her throat is still exposed, the muscles in her neck moving as she speaks. She twirls the dagger between her fingers. “I do wish to thank you for returning this to me. You have set me free, Caspian, and that is something I will not forget.”

My family stares at me with disbelieving and furious expressions. I cannot bear to look at them.

What have I done? I tried everything in my power to bring Sabine and me back together as well as restore the relationship between merfolk and humans, but it was all for nothing. The dream bracelet did not work any more than Maire intended it to. She played me all along, knowing I would do anything for Sabine.

And I doomed us all.

Something vicious flickers in Maire's dark eyes. "That is why I offer this to you now: rule both the Kingdom Above and Below with me, and I promise no harm will come to Sabine, her family, or yours."

The offer takes me by surprise. "Why… why would you want me to rule with you?"

Amusement plays at her full lips, the cut at the corner of her mouth closing itself. "What good is having everything but no one to share it with?"

"No."

"No?" One brow raises. "This is the best outcome within reach for you, princeling. I would consider carefully before answering with certainty. The fate of all you love is in the balance."

Devere is silent beside me, eyes downcast, still as a statue.

"This is your decision, no one else's," Maire reminds me. "Will you rule with me?"

Everyone I love. So many decisions led me here, to this place, two major ones being deals with this sea witch. She has always made sure I am desperate and have no other options when she presents me with a way out on her terms. We were so close, I had Sabine in my arms, but it was not enough. Maire made sure we would never succeed.

I am so sorry, Sabine.

"My answer is no."

Maire nods slowly, as if she expected this response. "Very well then. We have one more person to bring to our little party."

Panic shoots through my veins. What more can she do?

Maire locks gazes with me. "Sing."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SABINE

Waves thrash, and winds whip our hair and clothes. Luckily I managed to get into trousers and a shirt before we set sail, leaving that heavy nuisance behind. We encountered a handful of Condemned on our way to the beach but managed to arrive mostly unscathed.

While Oliver and I help Bill sail, Aksel sits with his arm around Sanne and speaks soothingly to her, asking her to tell him stories, no doubt to distract her. I make a note to thank him later.

All of us are soaked from the sea spray already before the thunder cracks and rain pours. I can still hear shrieks in the distance but focus on the task at hand. We decided to sail where we had last time, and from there… I just hope I can find my way to that sea witch's cavern before it's too late. Whatever "too late" means.

We have to grip the sides of the boat to keep from falling overboard. I blink the rain out of my eyes and scan the sea like there will be some sort of hint waiting for me. I will find Caspian and save him, whatever it takes.

This time when I touch my wrist, the dream bracelet is there, giving faint comfort.

Then I hear it: the Song of my heart, the one that dances in my dreams and begs me to remember and embrace it. I look to my left, certain that is where the Song is coming from. It beckons me, promising love and adventure and Caspian. I could listen to his voice for a thousand years and still yearn for more.

"Sabine?" Oliver catches my shoulder as I lean over the side. "What are you doing?"

“Let her go,” Bill orders, then presses something into my hand—the knife made with the luminescent crystals. The Song is so loud that I barely have the presence of mind to hear him tell me “Bring him home.”

I dive into the water.

CASPIAN

I try to fight it, but Maire's magic and my soul longing to complete the Song I never finished are more powerful than I can ever hope to be. The only thing I can hope is that Sabine is too far away to hear it.

At first I think I have luck on my side, because it does not work. But then Maire touches my shoulder, her magic expanding my reach significantly. It ripples outward, seeking Sabine in the farthest reaches of the sea.

I feel the Song latch on. Insistent, it drags her into the water. But she has too far to go and not enough air to make it unless she has one of the crystals. Even then, I am not sure.

Release the Song. Fight it.

Maire's magic digs deeper into my mind, forcing the words to stream from me in an enchanting melody that soothes my ears but grates my heart.

She will not make it… Still too far, travelling too slowly.

"We can fix that," Maire says. Darkness swirls at her fingertips, and I feel the hold on Sabine snap. In the next instant, a pillar of black tendrils appears before me, only to dissipate and reveal Sabine, choking, convulsing. "Well done, Caspian. I knew she would come after you. I just needed you to get her into the water."

Sabine's wide eyes find mine. My attempts to go to her are futile. I have stopped singing but cannot move, and all the while Maire slinks toward her with a predatory grin. Magic ripples once more between her hands, and a circlet appears, with the luminescent crystals embedded into its twisted metalwork.

"All hail the princess whose heart is divided between land and sea," Maire croons mockingly as she places the circlet atop Sabine's head. The air bubble it forms allows Sabine to cough up the water from her lungs.

Clarity sharpens her facial features, and she takes in her surroundings with a terrified awe.

“You will release Caspian,” Sabine demands when she finally catches her breath. Her knuckles turn white as she grips the knife in her hand and pointedly stares down Maire instead of the Condemned who are suddenly growling at her. The scarring at her throat stands out in a pale silver.

“A deal was struck, Your Highness,” Maire replies, hissing the S’s. “I am a woman of my word. Caspian failed his end of the deal and so is now mine.”

“Then make a deal with me.”

NO! The only outward sign of my inward struggle is that I twitch. Sabine briefly glances at me before refocusing on Maire.

“You have nothing I desire. That is, other than what was already mine to begin with.” Her nails press into Sabine’s jaw and cheeks, and she turns her head this way and that to examine her. “I see so much of my sister in you,” she murmurs. Her free hand caresses the side of Sabine’s face, knuckles following the line of her cheekbone and down her jaw.

Then, in a flash, Maire yanks the knife away and plunges it into Sabine’s abdomen.

CHAPTER THIRTY

SABINE

Agony lances through me, making me double over. I cry out, but the sound is disjointed, the feeling of lightning arcing through me again and again. The crystal in the knife reacts to the dormant crystal powder in the tattoo, where she stabbed me as if she knew it was there.

The bubble of air increases to include my upper body. Yet I struggle to breathe, my shaking hands grabbing at the hilt of the knife she left in my gut. Caspian stares in horror, but he doesn't move—even his tail is completely still, just like the other merfolk nearby.

"You have more than I imagined," Maire whispers in delight. "How much did my sister pass on to you, I wonder. Saara did always wish to be the Heart of the Sea, but it is mine by birthright." The greenish hue to her skin is now gone, and her lips are perfect, no more split or scar. Skin reforms on her throat, taking its time to weave back together. "She always let her emotions rule her instead of her head, much like you. And the people loved her for it."

The dream bracelet warms my wrist; strength fills me just enough to yank the knife out with a sharp wail.

Maire continues like she doesn't notice. Even though her eyes are on me, they are unfocused. "She would have made the sea a chaotic mess, unable to handle the weightiness of difficult decisions. I had to take what was rightfully mine before they could bestow it upon her. So they saw me as a threat, and Saara helped them bind my magic into the dagger." She takes my chin in her clammy hand and studies me. "But do you know what? They underestimated me, just as many have underestimated you. They thought they could take my power, bind it, and throw me into the bottom of the sea to die."

My breaths come in ragged pants, and I can feel the wound sealing. My blood drips from the weapon and lands in the water, only to disperse in its own morbid dance.

How much of this is true? I wonder when I'm able to think past the pain. With her gripping my face, I cannot check Caspian's reaction.

"With what magic I had left, I cursed merfolk and humans, for they worked together to bind me: I stripped the merfolk of their higher magic and the humans of all of theirs, and I sent out a plague of darkness amidst them. Out of those affected, the humans instantly died, unable to contain it, but the merfolk transformed, driven mad trying to fight the darkness."

The nearby Condemned growl and snap but stay where they are.

"Saara left me chained to the bottom of the sea to die by the hands of the bloodthirsty creatures I created." She shakes her head, leaning closer to me like she wants to share a secret. "The Heart of the Sea cannot be killed by the sea or its creatures. Instead of taking my life, it cradled me, kept me alive, and let me bide my time."

I should be attacking her while she is talking, but part of me wants to hear what she has to say. So many answers to so many questions—

Maire narrows her sights on the dream bracelet, now emitting a soft glow but nearly burning my skin. "I made it stronger than I thought. Silly me." A dagger materializes in her hand, the one we found in the palace. Despite being onyx, the blade gleams menacingly. "I can remedy that."

I adjust my grip, trying to ready myself for an attack. How I'll be able to move with my legs submerged, I have no idea, but I have to try.

Instead of going for me, Maire whirls around and stabs Caspian in the heart. His eyes remain locked on mine. I see the life flicker out of them just as I lunge forward, awkwardly half-swimming toward them. The moment Maire removes it, Caspian slumps to the ground.

My dream bracelet snaps and falls with him, all color gone. My strength flees instantly.

Caspian, my Caspian, my heart sobs.

Maire turns on me, snatches me by the neck. My scars burn under her touch, and the air bubble shrinks drastically, barely covering my head. “Now,” she purrs, “it is time for me to reclaim what is rightfully mine.”

I lash out as she does, my blade finding her not-quite-healed throat as hers finds my chest. Stars dance in my vision, a bright light emanating from me and leaking through my knife and into her, like my soul is being stripped from my body. I cannot draw breath.

Maire gurgles, staring down at me in disbelief. Her darkness dissipates then reappears, emanating from her fingertips, winding down the dagger and into my chest. It jabs into the wound…

My jaw drops in a silent scream. Tears blur my vision, but I can still see that Maire has yet to recover. Mouth gaping, she releases her hold on my neck and grabs at her own. Her magic tries to continue to heal her around the blade.

But my magic—if it even is mine—grabs the sides of her wound and pries it open more, driving my knife deeper.

Using the last of my will, I remove her dagger and drive it into her heart. It pierces easily, as if she were made of butter, and instantly magic floods me like liquid fire. I tremble and try to keep hold.

My vision clears. The crystals in the circlet shatter, and the sea swallows me whole. Yet I hold my breath and keep the weapons in place, each passing moment more painful but powerful than the last. Maire claws at my hands in a desperate, futile attempt to make me release her. I stare her down, determined that if I am to die, I am taking her with me.

Then Maire slackens, ichor oozing out of her throat. Bit by bit, her body dissipates into sea foam, like she is being unmade, and I watch, swaying with dizziness. I want to be sure she is gone before I let death take me.

There is no more sign of her. The Condemned go still, as if turned into statues. Tucking the weapons into my waistband, I swim to Caspian. I have

no hope for survival, stuck at the bottom of the sea with no oxygen and no crystals to keep me alive. My lungs burn, but I ignore them and pull Caspian into my arms. His skin is too ashen, too cold. His head falls against my chest, and I run my fingers through his long silky hair, pushing it out of his face so I can kiss him one last time.

I will see you soon, Caspian.

I exhale slowly and cradle Caspian against me. I intend to inhale sharply, to end it quickly, but the air leaves my lungs in a force that leaves me mystified. It travels in all directions, a bright light in the midst of overwhelming darkness, and penetrates everything around it. Its warmth ripples far beyond the palace, taking over even the farthest reaches of Maire's influence. I can feel every creature in the sea, every cavern and shipwreck and hidden place. The light conquers and destroys the darkness with a simple touch.

And then I inhale.

CASPIAN

There is nothing but cold darkness. I *am* nothing, no longer attached to my body or spirit or even to the world.

And then I am bathed in light and warmth. The light draws me back, carefully lowering me into my body. Someone is holding me. It takes effort to open my eyes, and time for them to adjust. I squint until the light dims, and I realize it is coming from Sabine. She clutches me, eyes focused on mine. Then she breathes in quickly, and I panic, shooting upright to give her my breath.

But she does not choke. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. Wonder in her expression, she whispers, “Caspian.” Her golden hair shimmers like it does in the sunlight, and her green eyes glow softly like her skin.

We embrace and exchange desperate kisses as if they will prove we are alive, as if they will make up for lost time. Finally, she sees me. Finally, we are together again.

Devere clears his throat. We reluctantly pull away, but I hold her hand, loath to be parted from her.

There are no more Condemned, only merfolk. All at once it hits me as my mother and father cry and hold onto my brothers, all of us reunited once again. Hedeon, Ammiras, Raed…

My father looks at Sabine and bows. “We are forever in your debt.” Everyone else follows suit, even those just coming into the palace to investigate. Sabine looks around and shakes her head.

“There is no debt,” Sabine announces loudly for all to hear. “Only freedom.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SABINE

Caspian and I take our time swimming back to shore. I soak up all the new sights and sounds and revel in the way I can move through the water with him… with my own tail. It took a little bit to learn how to move the muscles, but I start to understand it. I transformed myself with merely a thought, and the magic did my bidding, giving me gills and an iridescent tail of every color imaginable.

Caspian beams at me and constantly finds excuses to touch me, whether brushing my arm or holding my hand or pressing a kiss to my temple. I want to have alone time with him, but there is something I must do first.

We are almost there when a beautiful song waltzes through the sea, making its own currents as it travels. It plucks at my soul, beckoning me. Oliver. He must have remembered the pattern and decided to Call the merfolk—

It is not Oliver. We swim up to the cliff where the instrument awaits, only to find Mor clutching the rods, waiting. She wears Mormor's robe, and between that and her loose braid floating in the water, it strikes me for the first time how much she looks like Mormor. A bittersweet ache pains my heart.

Mor gawks at us, a steady stream of bubbles escaping her mouth.

"It will be easier to speak on land," I tell her.

Still dumbfounded, she hurries to the surface, and we follow. Many people wait for us, my family in the middle of all of them, and they watch with a chorus of gasps as Caspian and I move toward land. Slowly, our bodies transform, smoothing over gills and making webbing disappear, exchanging tails and fins for legs and feet. But the scales remain, covering the more intimate parts like clothing.

Other merfolk join behind us, answering the Call, and transform as well. The King and Queen stand beside Caspian, a little shaky on their new legs.

“I broke the curse of The Fall,” I answer the unspoken question. “There is no more sea witch, no more Condemned. Everything has been set right, and magic has been restored to both the merfolk and humans.”

So many staring eyes trying to find logic in what they see and not being able to reconcile it. I wait for someone to speak, but Mor stumbles forward to pull me into a hug.

“I thought we’d lost you,” she manages between choked sobs. I hug her back and let her weep. Far, Oliver, and Sanne smile at me, emotional, but they let me have this moment with Mor.

In the distance I see merfolk walking away from the palace, no doubt those turned back from being Condemned.

Mor finally releases me and smooths my hair away from my face. She purses her lips as she studies me. “You are merfolk now?”

I shake my head. “I am the Heart of the Sea, what the Ambassador was originally supposed to be. I am the bridge between our worlds.” I tenderly wipe at Mor’s wet cheeks.

She nods and sniffs, a hint of a smile at her trembling mouth. “That suits you. Mormor would be just as proud of you as I am.”

We embrace again, and then Mor turns her attention to King Fiske and Queen Ginevra.

“We were wrong,” she states simply. “Is there any way you could forgive us?”

Far moves to stand beside her and take her hand. “We understand it may take time to build trust again, but we wish to rebuild the alliance, no matter how long it takes. Our daughter was always right: our people belong together.”

Caspian intertwines his fingers with mine and squeezes. I squeeze back with a smile that wants to break into a huge grin.

“Both sides have made mistakes,” King Fiske replies finally. “We should have been honest about how much trouble we had with the Condemned. In our pride we thought we could handle it ourselves.” He and Queen Ginevra exchange a hopeful look. “We accept your offer for an alliance.”

My grins breaks through, no longer trying to contain my joy.

“We shall figure out the details,” Far announces. “But first, we celebrate!”

CASPIAN

Throughout the rest of the day and into the night, we celebrate with drinks and food and dance and laughter. Sabine takes moments with her family, promising to visit often and share her adventures. Bill especially is insistent that she continue to sail with him and help find new treasures.

“Of course,” Sabine tells him with a smirk. “There’s never enough treasure or adventures for a true pirate.”

He chuckles and gives her a side hug.

Aksel seeks me out in the meantime. “So, you were a merman the whole time.”

“In a manner of speaking.” I pat his shoulder. “I want to thank you for your friendship and help. For knowing very little, you put a lot of trust in us.”

“I have a penchant for chasing adventure and mysteries.” He nods in the pirate’s direction. “I’m going to take Captain Bill up on his offer to join you. I hear there is never a dull moment with The Lucky Pirate.”

“That is the truth,” I confirm. “We will be glad to have you.”

We chat for a bit longer, and Oliver joins to catch up with me. At the end of the evening, Queen Josefine pulls me aside.

“You will take care of her.” A statement that sounds very much like a question.

“Always,” I promise.

The answer assures her. “She has always belonged with you.”

“I am glad we finally found a way to be together.”

She smiles. “I am too.”

Everyone says their goodbyes, but Sabine and I linger, watching as they all disperse until it is just the two of us left.

Silently, Sabine tugs on my hand, leading me toward our cave. So much has happened between when we were children and now, and despite everything, we found each other again.

We kiss in the same spot we first did, holding each other close as we stand in the water. Each touch is tender and drawn out, like we are still convincing ourselves that this is real.

Then she pulls away just far enough to look at me with deep sorrow. I am about to ask what is wrong when she says quietly, “I am so sorry I didn’t figure out who you were earlier. I should have known it was you. I __”

I cup her face in my hands and wipe a falling tear. “How could you have known? I look different as a human, and how were you supposed to guess that such magic was possible for me to even become a human?”

If Sabine had come to me as a mermaid, I doubt I would have recognized her. As the Heart of the Sea, she looks different now in whatever form, less human and more ethereal. But there are still hints of her, enough that I know she is still my Sabine: the scarring on her throat and leg, the way she moves with determination, the liveliness of her green eyes.

“I should have figured it out sooner,” is all she has to say in response, and the words pain me. Because of course, if I were in her place, I would have felt just as guilty.

“Everything is well,” I murmur. “We restored the alliance between our peoples and found a way to be together.”

“We did,” Sabine whispers, resting her forehead against mine. “I was terrified that it wouldn’t work, or you had found someone else, or—” She swallows.

“I had the same fears,” I admit. “But I never stopped loving you.” Gently, I trace the symbol just below her collarbone: *One who is my heart.*

To my surprise, she copies it perfectly onto my chest. “I love you too.”

I grin and squeeze her hands, leaning in for another meaningful kiss. “Are you ready to go home?”

Her smile could light up the night. “I’ll go anywhere as long as I’m with you.”

Together, we return to the sea.

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